



RACE AND SPACE

BY JOHN A. POWELL

What Really Drives Metropolitan

I recently met with a high-ranking administrator in a large, predominantly African-American city to discuss the problems that cities like his face, from failing school systems, depopulation, and business and job loss to the suburbs, to a housing crisis marked by boarded-up houses and vacant lots. I suggested to the administrator, whom I will call Dr. Jones, that one of the problems facing central cities and older-ring suburbs is the constant pulling of resources away from the region's core and the deployment of these resources to the outer edges of the metropolitan area, or put succinctly, sprawl. Dr. Jones agreed and added that sprawl can be fully understood only in racial terms: the developing outer-ring is always upper middle class and white.

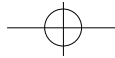
I asserted that the city and older suburbs must find a way to coordinate and develop a regional strategy to benefit from the resources that are spread unevenly throughout the region, reverse

the trend of fragmentation or isolationism amongst municipalities, and halt the pull of resources. The idea of coordinating with the suburbs disturbed Dr. Jones: "White people in the suburbs are hostile to the city largely because the city is black. They will only work with the city if they think they can take it over. They are racist, I don't trust them, and I won't work with them."

I tried to assure Dr. Jones that my suggestion was not based on naive trust and that I, too, was aware that regionalism had often been used to the detriment of the people of color living in the central cities. And while this issue must be addressed, a nonregional solution for the problems facing the urban core is not a solution at all. Unfortunately, our discussion was cut short. This article is written in continuation of the spirit of our discussion.

Race has been a major factor in the spatial configuration of our metropolitan areas. The outer-ring suburbs of metropolitan areas are overwhelmingly white (although recently minorities, and in particular middle-class blacks, have participated in the move to the suburbs), and the inner cities are populated largely by people of color, especially blacks. This spatial and racial pattern makes sharing or fairly distributing regional benefits almost impossible. White suburbanites resist regional strategies, reluctant to embrace something that will have negative economic con-

John A. Powell is the Julius E. Davis Professor of Law and executive director of the Institute on Race and Poverty at the University of Minnesota Law School. He acknowledges Colleen Walbran's assistance with this article.



sequences for them—which is rational, albeit shortsighted. Blacks also resist regional solutions because they fear a loss of cultural control or identity and a loss of political power.

Ignoring these claims from the minority community is a serious mistake. Doing so makes a regional solution into just one more solution imposed by whites on people of color. Given the history of white and nonwhite relations in this country, particularly around the development of sprawl and metropolitan fragmentation, this is simply untenable. At a more practical level, in regions with a substantial minority population, regional approaches that do not engage the minority community will have difficulty gaining the necessary support. But regional solutions are, I think, imperative, because a number of important inner-city problems are caused by regional forces, and thus can be adequately addressed only at the regional level. A fail-

ure to address central-city problems affects the entire region adversely. The failure to adopt regional strategies adversely affects the central cities.

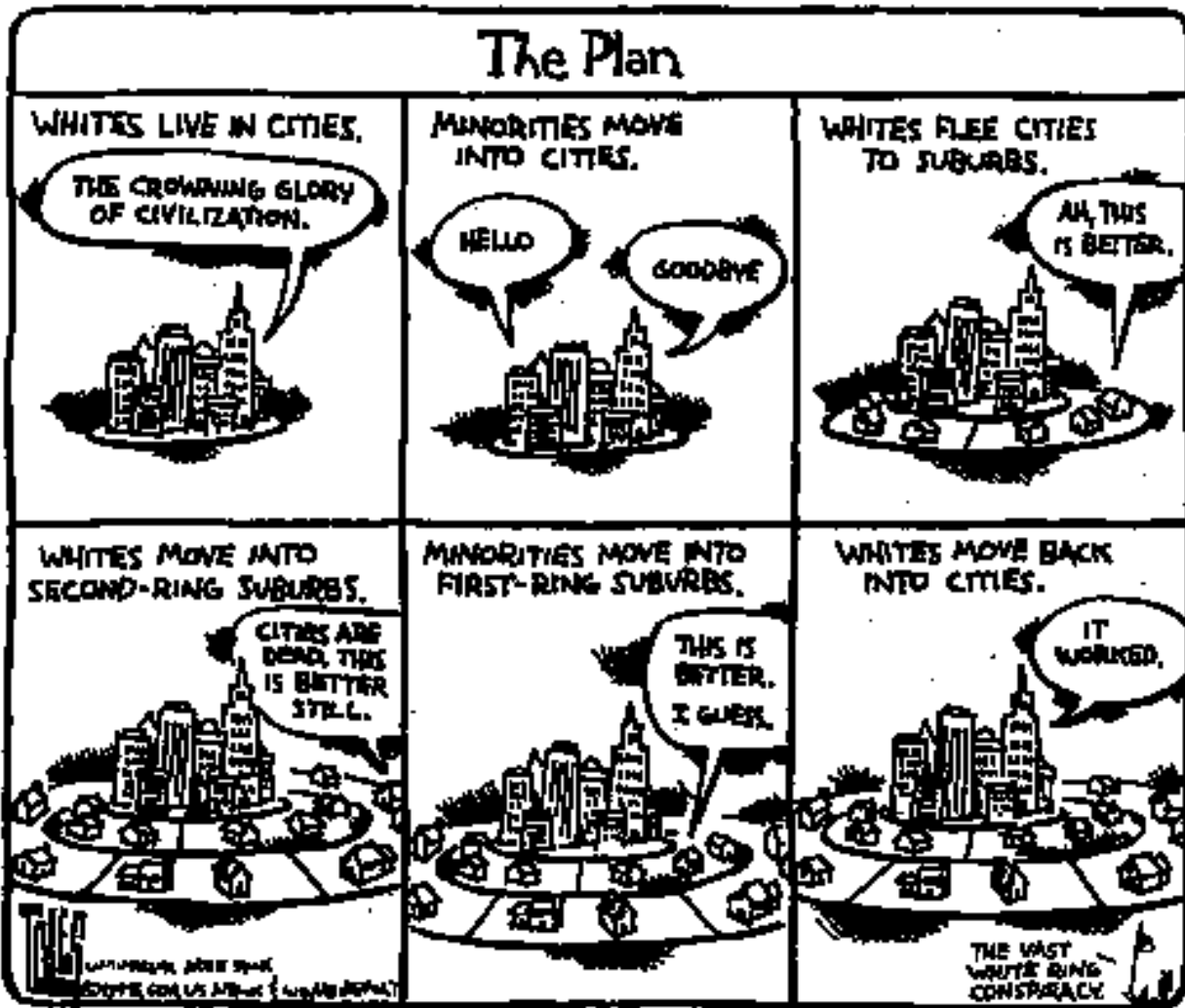
We need a regional approach that gives cities or communities a way to maintain appropriate control of their political and cultural institutions, while sharing in regional resources and balancing regional policymaking. We need an approach that avoids both the myopia of local, fragmented governance and the blunt regionalism exercised by an overarching unit of government, such as a county or state, that can suffocate local governments.

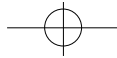
The Metropolitan Area in Black and White

The economic and political isolation of poor minorities in the inner cities is caused by flight, or sprawl, and fragmentation. The movement further away

From the film 'Metropolis' by Fritz Lang Photo Courtesy Kubal

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from the central cities to the suburbs is sprawl. The effect of the creation of rigid boundaries, which separate municipalities from each other and more importantly from the central core, is fragmentation. As a result of these forces, minorities find themselves in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, where four out of ten of their neighbors (or they themselves) are poor. Of the more than 8.2 million people who live in these areas, more than half are black, a quarter are Hispanic.

The residential segregation and concentration of poverty in neighborhoods inhabited by blacks did not come about accidentally. It was constructed and is perpetuated through governmental housing and transportation policies, institutional practices, and private behaviors. In the 1940s and 1950s, the Federal Housing Administration pursued an explicit policy against granting mortgages for homes in minority or integrated neighborhoods and preferred to back new construction rather than the purchase of existing units. Essentially, the FHA paid whites to leave the central cities and confined blacks to the central cities, which were, in turn, divested by the federal government and private capital. The national highways facilitated exit from the central city and destabilized many urban neighborhoods. "Urban renewal" efforts destroyed stable black neighborhoods. Local governments have also contributed to the problems of segregation and concentrated poverty through the ongoing practice of exclusionary zoning (requiring large minimum lot sizes or banning multifamily housing), which makes it nearly impossible for poor families to find affordable housing in white suburban communities. Similar private measures have included but are not limited to the practice of blockbusting by the real estate profession and the creation of racially restrictive covenants by homeowners.

The concentrated poverty that these kinds of policies create is usually ruinous to people's life chances. High levels of crime, drug use, and other social pathologies emerge and become self-perpetuating. In addition to this poor quality of life, residents experience severely limited social and economic opportunities. The quality of schools, housing, and municipal services and the availability of transportation and employment are undermined.

When one part of the region becomes dysfunctional, the entire area is compromised. This is what is happening with the inner cities and older suburbs—their difficulties are negatively affecting entire regions. Among other things, a poor and racially segregated urban core harms the reputation of the metropolitan region as a whole and makes it less inviting to international, national, and

local businesses as well as families looking for homes.

But white suburbanites have traditionally resisted claims like these that tie them to the inner city. The justification for this resistance changes over time. The current justification is that the "culture of poverty" found in the inner cities will infiltrate protected suburban enclaves—a justification that is simply a new name for a long-standing racism directed toward the central cities.

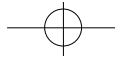
White segregationism, or resistance to regionalism, manifests itself in the support of in-place strategies. Such strategies attempt to move resources and opportunities to low-income central-city residents and to generate improvements in urban neighborhoods of color, as opposed to mobility-oriented schemes, which aim to disperse central-city residents to existing opportunities. Whites want to keep minorities "immobile" and out of their suburban neighborhoods.

In-place strategies frequently receive support from minorities as well, though for different reasons. One motivation is the preservation of cultural identity. As Cornel West and others have argued, deconcentration of minorities can result in both assimilation of minorities who are pocketed in more affluent areas and dilution of culture in predominantly black areas.

Minorities also fear the erosion of political power and the loss of control over the political process if the political base of their communities diminishes or the minority population is dispersed throughout the region. Minorities would often rather retain this control even if opportunity structures are lacking in their communities. Political power is actually a very complex issue. On the one hand, the geographic concentration of minorities does not guarantee their political cohesion, nor, given the challenges to majority-minority legislative districts, does it guarantee the election of minority candidates. Even if minority candidates do win office, they are likely to be isolated in the legislature. But, on the other hand, mobility and the resulting dispersion of blacks throughout a metropolitan area may generate a backlash in some places, reducing black political power. There is evidence of a white backlash against black interests when the black population rises above 30 percent of a voting district. While a mobility strategy seems to be a better choice for the creation and maintenance of economic power for communities of color, it is likely to undermine political power.

Federated Regionalism

A federated approach recognizes the regional



nature of racial and economic segregation and provides a solution that integrates regional policy-making with local governance. An example is tax-base sharing, which, as practiced in Minnesota's Twin Cities, distributes the regional tax base according to regional needs without compromising local interests. Each city is allocated a certain share of the regional tax base but controls the tax rate for its residents, thereby maintaining authority and discretion over local issues. Another example is Portland's regional housing strategy. There, the regional governing body sets requirements for affordable housing, but municipalities maintain responsibility for zoning and how they choose to meet their share of the regional housing need.

While strategies of federated regionalism such as those noted above can provide a balance between local governance and regional concerns, not all federated strategies strike that balance. Those that fail to do so can actually perpetuate regional fragmentation. An example is Indianapolis's Uni-Gov, which made regional many areas of governance but left the schools under existing local segregated boundaries. The ideal balance between "local" and "federated" must be responsive to concerns of communities of color and the problems of concentrated poverty. It is critical that racial minorities participate in the effort to strike that balance.

Minorities have cause to be wary of regional solutions to the problems of segregation and concentrated poverty. What little political power they wield seems at risk of dilution if regionalism further fragments their communities. In searching for regional strategies, we must steer between two extremes. One is to be so jealous of local control as to preserve political and cultural control, but in areas that are isolated and starved of economic resources. The other extreme is a regionalism that offers access to resources at the cost of a stifled political voice and cultural assimilation or marginalization. We need a metropolitan approach that addresses both the economic and concentrated-poverty issues of the central core while respecting the right to effective participation in political and cultural institutions.

Tensions between local concerns and the needs of the whole metropolitan region are healthy. Structuring these tensions in a way that leads to true democratic cooperation in metropolitan planning—cooperation that transcends racial polarization—is the challenge. ■