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DISCRIMINATION AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SHELTER

CHARLES ABRAMS*

THE "industrial revolution" was not one revolution, but a series of revolutions, each successive phase of which precipitated a social mutation in its wake. Each social mutation in turn was marked by a new phase in man's eternal quest for status.

Though it has often been emphasized that one of the most important of man's recent advances has been the shift from status to contract, status continues to play an important role in the social milieu, and his search for status still presses for fulfillment in an ever-widening range of yearnings. While wealth and vocation have subordinated birth and descent as factors in American life, and while equal access to opportunity is no longer a fiction for most people, the fact remains that as equality of condition is achieved, a human restlessness continues to press for individual recognition and individual distinction. We search for differences between ourselves and our fellows and failing this, we strive for an identification of differences between the group of which we are members and some other group which we fear, hate, or envy.

The expansion of government functions in the last twenty-five years has advanced two major drives for status—the quest for political prestige in the democratic world, and for political power in the monocratic or totalitarian world. But for the masses in both worlds, the seeking for a differentiation in one's personal position still continues to hold a high place in human aspirations.

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As unionization and other forms of group organization have narrowed the range of individualized activities in America, group status has advanced into the social focus, and the neighborhood one lives in has moved up as one of the more distinguishing signs of group status in American life. The growth of the suburb has accented the trend—the suburb and the quest for status are today shaping the American personality of the future, as the frontier once shaped the American personality of the past.

In the twenty-five years preceding the end of World War II, no less than 75% of new developments for owner occupancy were built in peripheral sections of cities. Nearly one-half the recent national population rise has been in the city outskirts. These suburbs were the answer to a number of thorny problems and disaffections flowing out of industrialization, the machine, and the rise of big cities. The suburb met the demand for space, privacy, and the nostalgia for country life. Here was the place to find a home, and to acquire the bundle of rights, dreams, satisfactions and illusions that came wrapped up with the deed.

These houses in the suburbs were bought largely by “little people”—skilled and semi-skilled workers, clerks, small merchants, young professionals, people comprising America’s great middle class. Their contact with the city, its culture and civilization, was now more ephemeral than before. Some had come straight from the cities with the conscious or subconscious wish to escape from neighborhoods where they once had brief contacts with Negroes or other migrants in shops and schools. Most had invested their life’s savings in homes, and they became peculiarly sensitive to fears and rumors of events which might threaten either their equities or their status.

The common thread that bound the suburbanites together was not culture or tradition, or civic pride, but neighborhood dignity. The home magazines told them so repeatedly, and so did the realtors, the neighborhood associations, and even officials of the FHA.¹

Neighborhood dignity became synonymous with neighborhood homogeneity, while neighborhood homogeneity gave rise to a concerted effort to keep out the “wrong people” and the “foreign element.”

In the pre-automobile century some groups lived in voluntary

¹ See FHA manuals from 1935 to 1950, the relevant excerpts from which are given in Abrams, *Forbidden Neighbors* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955), ch. XVII.

ghettos, but there were also mixed formations which represented a variety of cultures, languages, colors, interests, tastes and idiosyncrasies. Negroes, whites, Jews, gentiles, Italians and others had to live in the same general areas to serve each other. There were occasional antagonisms, but ultimately a rapprochement was achieved or achievable. The tendency over the long run was to blend interests and to subordinate biases. In contrast, the suburban community now strove for a pattern of one-type occupancy, to be reenforced by private and governmental devices.

The federal government became the most effective promoter of class exclusion. For more than a decade and a half, the two main federal housing agencies had under way a concerted, publicized, government-supported program under which a great section of the new generation was set apart from "alien" culture, taught to live with and respect only its own kind, and trained to oppose intrusion by those who were different. A man should never live with those in a "higher or lower income scale than his own," the new home-buyers were told. It is the part of wisdom to buy in a neighborhood where people are of one's own "racial or national type," wrote a government housing economist.² A hierarchy of "desirables" and "undesirables" running the gamut from the better-born to the base-born in order of their acceptability became the guide-book for federal policy. "Homogeneity" became a crucial determinant of value and government field agents were instructed to inquire whether the neighborhood was homogeneous in population.³ The antipathetic or non-homogeneous type of neighborhood was no longer to be considered a good risk, and even the children were not to mix with others of "an incompatible racial element," or to go to the same school, according to the F.H.A. manuals.⁴

The worker who may have had no prejudice against a Negro co-worker was now taught to be prejudiced against him as a neighbor. Housing was built up as a wedge to split class from class. The American neighborhood became a breeding ground of bias, fear, and discrimination, and a whole generation of American home-owners got a dose of it which has left lasting effects on the body politic.

Millions of homes in thousands of neighborhoods were now all

² Ibid.

³ Abrams, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

⁴ See footnote 1 *supra*.

patterned upon the placement into isolated areas of people who thought they were of a common stamp. Neighborhoods were divided into those of the "elite" and the unwanted and the intelligence of one's neighbor now became secondary to his race, religion, income, color, or social status. Children of one section were enjoined from mixing with those of another, and thousands of homogeneous islands were set up which were homogeneous only in their fears and which were more foreign to the American tradition than any of the outsiders they sought to exclude. Finally, though the official manuals no longer mention homogeneity or exclusion, both homogeneity and exclusion have won a place in the national political scene and any sincere effort to extend democratic equality of opportunity and equal right to shelter has become politically taboo.

While these social developments were occurring in the suburbs, a housing famine now confronted the newly in-migrating minorities in the cities. It was affecting their opportunities in life, their educational patterns, their aspirations, and their children's prospects. However firmly the courts might strike at segregation in schools, such segregation would continue as long as there was segregation in neighborhoods—in fact, the latter might now become the very vehicle for achieving the school segregation indirectly, which the courts had outlawed directly.

The housing shortage on the one hand, and the fears and biases in the all-white districts of city and suburb on the other hand, could not fail to exert their influences on the opportunities of minorities as well. Housing shortage limited the capacity of the new minority groups to move to areas of opportunity and to achieve the vertical mobility which previous in-migrant groups had enjoyed. For the simple fact is that the non-white migrant was and will remain more identifiable than his European predecessors. He cannot lose his color by changing his rural dungarees for suburban flannels. Nor, if current prejudice becomes firmly fixed and widespread, will he find escape through educational improvement alone. Unless the same opportunities are opened to him as were offered to others before him, it may be difficult to answer the charge that here at last is an exception to the American formula of social and economic fluidity.

The blocks to an economic and social advance by minority groups have been challenged in some states, but they continue in most—deficiencies in environment and home life; hostile community attitudes;

resistance to hiring by management; educational lag; lack of apprenticeship and on-the-job training opportunities; deficiencies in the counseling services; discriminatory practices by private employment agencies; failure by minorities to train or apply for jobs; opposition by some unions; transience, which prevents the sinking of roots into the community and its available opportunities; lack of leadership, contacts, know-how, unrealistic aspirations or opportunities for emulation; the language and communication difficulties of some groups.

Whether these obstacles will disappear with time will depend largely upon whether existing patterns are altered—patterns of housing and environment; of attitudes; of jobs and competition for jobs; of education; of training and guidance; and of the official programs designed to eliminate the barriers that frustrate equal access to opportunity in life.

Yet if economic and social advance is to continue as a fact in the American scene, not only is equal access to housing and to employment imperative, but there must be equal access as well to the essential educational equipment with which to compete for opportunities. But this is far from the fact today. In a recent study by the New York State Commission Against Discrimination, it was found that Negroes must have higher qualifications than whites to compete for jobs; that lack of formal schooling is more of a handicap for the Negro than for the white; that there is a considerably higher drop-out among non-whites than among whites at the high school level; that while one of five white high school graduates completes college, only one out of nine Negro high school graduates does so; that stability of the home affects the school record of youth. The better records are of those born in the North of parents in stable homes.

In a city like Elmira, however, where there is a relatively small and stable Negro population, when Negroes were compared to whites from the same class background, "the Negroes show a more positive and constructive attitude toward school than the corresponding white youth. . . . The Negro expects more of himself and maintains more of a direction in his academic pursuits. . . . The Negroes do as well as, if not better than, the whites . . . according to traditional educational standards. . . . fewer Negroes drop out of school before graduation . . . of those who have graduated, more Negroes have actually gone on to college."⁵

⁵ Antrovsky, Aaron and Lerner, Melvin J.; *Discrimination and Low Incomes*,

It should be clear that the educational system of the South is reaping its price in the North; that it is having and will continue to have lasting repercussions upon the minority youth; that one of its effects is the perpetuation of the Negro at a lower cultural level and that this will continue to hamper Negro youngsters in the generation to come and to depress their opportunities, hopes and ambitions.

In no previous era in American history has public policy been so crucial from the standpoint of civil rights and of minorities. Up to 1890, the frontier was open and one-man, small-scale, localized enterprise continued to predominate both in agriculture and in trade. Though xenophobia, anti-Catholicism and class conflict erupted as industrialization expanded, there were safety valves hidden in the economic process—the competition for cheap labor acted to create a free labor market based on skill rather than national origin and capacity for work rather than breed or creed. The bias against new immigrants that burst into expression from time to time could not prevail against the sheer need for working hands. Economic opportunity and expansion, not public policy, were the primary forces that promised economic and social equality.

But with the more recent concentration of economic power in private hands and of political power in public hands, a high private and public morality has become more essential than ever before. So, too, with public education having attained a more pivotal role in the individual's destiny, it has become more than ever incumbent upon government to see to it that its aid is dispensed fully, adequately, and without preference to one group over another.

Finally, with greater devolution of responsibility upon government for housing and for mortgage money, these government benefits must be so apportioned as to assure the availability of homes primarily for those whom the private market ignores. This, in fact, is the most forceful justification for federal intervention in housing.

With the Negro migration from the South continuing and with the Puerto Rican migration only in its first stages, it must be manifest that the low educational level of migrants and their lack of housing are no longer a Southern or a Puerto Rican problem alone but one of national concern and responsibility. Yet, with a few sporadic excep-

tions, the problems of the migrating groups and minorities continue to be ignored.

The situation demands the emergence of a more realistic and more constructive leadership than ever before at the national executive level—one that will mobilize public opinion to an awareness of the issues; that will make better use of the devices existing at the executive level for insuring compliance by Southern communities with their constitutional obligations. Such leadership need not rely entirely on statute or on the compulsive processes. It can also embrace the wise use of all the prestige inherent in the executive power to reach and build up the more enlightened elements of the South. The power to earmark funds for improvements, the use of the patronage powers and other devices which lie within the domain of the executive, are all tools in this process which have remained unutilized and which, properly utilized, could help build up the more progressive Southern leadership which has recently been subordinated and submerged in influence.

So, too, must we in the North be more alert to our own responsibilities. The basic approach of official and unofficial agencies should be to treat disadvantaged groups not as a special kind of human being but rather as human beings with a special kind of problem. Among the proposals deserving support are more full-time school counselors; more clinical services in the schools to counteract the pressures of poor environment; extended use of group guidance in the schools to identify and encourage talented youth; guidance workshops for parents; special guidance programs in neighborhood houses; closer cooperation between schools and public and private agencies for information on jobs and apprenticeship opportunities; continued research into the field along the lines begun at the State Commission Against Discrimination after 1956.

Yet, while all this would help, it is largely housing that will continue to provide the main barrier to advance. Each time a single family migrates from a depressed area, a capital outlay by some public or private agency is required to supply the housing which that family needs; and since private enterprise does not provide such housing, the obligation must fall on some governmental unit prepared to put up both the capital and the annual subsidy required to bridge the gap between what the family can pay as rent and the

annual carrying cost. The level of government with the main obligation for producing such a program is the federal government.

Despite this, most of the federal housing commitments have leaned toward aiding the higher income groups, the builder and the mortgage institution. The programs which once did exist to help the low-income group are either fading from view or are being carried out so that they aggravate as much as help the position of the underprivileged family. The public housing program has been whittled to a shell and is little more than a receptacle for the DPs from urban renewal sites. In most cases, urban renewal has simply displaced minority families from their footholds to make way for new housing they cannot afford. A system which prescribes subsidies for the better-heeled and laissez-faire for the under-privileged can hardly be described as "the American way."

The primary aim of federal housing legislation should be to create decent environments rather than to pay the social costs of poor environment after the fact. The public function should be veered mainly toward benefiting those groups in the economy who are outside the field in which the private housing mechanisms operate. All aspects of existing programs which constrict or diminish the quantity of housing for disadvantaged groups should be modified and a main emphasis placed on increasing the housing supply. Mass clearance of shelter, however it may be justified as "slum clearance" during periods of housing surplus, has little justification when its main impact is to increase overcrowding.

A realistic federal housing program would encompass: 1) A mortgage loan program under which loans would be made for homeownership to poorer families at interest rates they can afford—the range would have to be from 0 to 2 percent. A \$2 billion program would entail a subsidy of not more than \$40 million annually. 2) A publicly-aided rental housing program envisioning the creation of neighborhoods in place of the monolithic projects now characteristic of housing programs. This means identifying those neighborhood values that should be preserved and improving rather than uprooting them. It calls for building of smaller projects of a less institutionalized character and for a system of subsidies which can be available for private, cooperative and public projects accessible to those of moderate incomes. In public housing it calls for policies which will remove the uncertainties of tenancy and the fear of dis-

possession when incomes increase. 3) A policy which will emphasize vacant land operations and the selection of under-occupied sites rather than the wholesale clearance of dense concentrations with their mass upheaval of underprivileged families, as is the present tendency.

It should be clear that only a multilateral attack on the problems of minorities will bring the progress the situation demands. Laws outlawing discrimination in private housing are needed, but they will not afford the Negro or the Puerto Rican the ability to pay the rent. Desegregation is also important but will mean little if white children do not attend the schools. Giving more teeth to a State Commission Against Discrimination is desirable, but it won't help if there are no Negroes qualified for the jobs the agency opens up.

Setting up expertly staffed employment agencies skilled in the finding and placement of specialized minority personnel would be another important step forward. Publicizing opportunities and gains among minority groups through sources that reach them would help break down hesitancy to train and apply for jobs. Talented students should be encouraged to take courses in new fields and become the inspiration for others to follow similar careers. Encouragement of youth to apply for apprenticeships would help overcome the tendency to favor the job with temporarily higher pay but fewer future prospects. The apprenticeship system needs careful attention to widen its benefits—it has escaped scrutiny for all too long.

Proper contacts should be established by citizens' groups with the press, which can be useful in publicizing opportunities through news stories as well as in raising the general level of community morality on discrimination. News is too often pitched to the negative aspects of the discrimination issue and setbacks are too often felt to be more newsworthy than gains.

Other advances could be made among Negroes themselves by creating private agencies with functions similar to those of the Puerto Rican Migration Division, which could chart the cities where good opportunities for employment and housing exist and to which workers could be directed. Such an undertaking would often save many migrants from unnecessary expense and frustration. This task or part of it might be undertaken through a federal agency.

Citizen pressure to condition federal aid upon nondiscriminatory practices in FHA-aided housing has been virtually nil. The result

is that discrimination still prevails in the field and far from enough has been done by FHA or by citizens' groups to induce builders to undertake projects in which minorities would be accepted.

While the main problem lies in the public apathy, the fact nevertheless is that, in the long run, the impetus for constructive gains must come from such citizens' groups and organizations—they are and will continue to be one of the great moving forces in the preservation of American principles against the corrosive influences of prejudice and selfish interest.

The threat of poverty amidst plenty is not an idle one. For if economic and social stratification are permitted to take root in America, the new identifiable minority groups may become the first important exception in the American scheme of equal opportunity. The most impressive force to counteract this development is the unyielding concern of a responsible public and of an informed and unselfish leadership to whom the security of American principles is as vital as the security of America itself.