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The Integration Debate: Competing Futures for American Cities
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BOOK REVIEW

The Integration Debate: Competing Futures for American Cities
Chester Hartman & Gregory D. Squires (Eds)
ISBN 10 0195392841

Although legal mandates support the pursuit of integration in America, segregation remains the dominant reality. The Integration Debate, edited by Chester Hartman and Greg Squires, highlights ‘the ongoing costs of the legacy of discrimination and lays out the policy choices for overcoming it’ (p. xiii). Housing advocates from a variety of fields debate two conflicting approaches to integration: ghetto dispersal and ghetto enrichment.

Despite the growth in America’s middle-income black population, prospects for achieving an integrated society are, at best, uncertain. Many blacks suffer from integration exhaustion and race fatigue. Based on the experiences of being the first black person in a neighborhood, some blacks question whether being a pioneer is worth it. In recent decades the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Justice Department have acted slowly and sporadically in enforcing fair housing laws. The picture, however, is not all that gloomy. Most metropolitan areas have some stable, racially integrated communities. Furthermore, high levels of immigration have resulted in the creation of hundreds of racially and ethnically diverse urban communities—a product of laissez-faire rather than consciously planned integration efforts.

Legal strategies to promote integration pose three difficult dilemmas. First, eliminating segregation would probably require race conscious programs, but courts have generally invalidated racial quotas used to maintain racially integrated communities. Second, the prospect of achieving an integrated society through litigation under fair housing legislation looks remote, since many victims of discrimination are unwilling to step forward to demand equal treatment, and providing the facts to prove allegations of discrimination is a difficult task. Finally, the federal courts have issued conflicting decisions concerning the legality of race-based policies with respect to housing as well as educational integration, approving race-based approaches in some cases and invalidating them in others.

The Integration Debate provides weak evidence of the adverse impacts of racial and income segregation on residents’ lives. Educational desegregation does not necessarily lead to equal schooling. Black students often come from homes lacking a strong educational emphasis, and consequently are frequently assigned to different educational tracks than whites. Samuel Myers and colleagues find a positive relationship between segregation and racial wage disparities at the metropolitan level but concede that they do not know why this relationship exists. Violent street crime is perhaps the main health issue facing black inner city areas, but as Briggs et al. (2010) show in their recent book, Moving to Opportunity, poverty deconcentration will not keep teenage boys away from crime. Similarly, it will be
difficult to eliminate the ‘segregation tax’ (an inability to benefit from price rises) because this would require redirecting black demand away from the ghettos and their adjoining racially changing neighborhoods. Finally, there is no doubt that segregation indirectly contributes to the high rates of incarceration of inner city black men but to claim, as Mark Mauer does, that the answer is more lenient sentencing and reduced policing, is ludicrous because this would worsen the lives of law abiding residents living in problematic areas.

America’s HOPE VI program—which combines redevelopment and the creation of income mixed communities along with the use of housing vouchers for those who do not move back—relies on positive results from the Chicago’s Gautreaux Project. Contributors to The Integration Debate offer a variety of criticisms of HOPE VI: (1) that it may be difficult to duplicate Gautreaux’s positive results in HOPE VI because it utilized volunteers whereas HOPE VI involves forced movers; (2) that HOPE VI displacement may ‘shred existing social networks’ (p. 205); (3) that HOPE VI may shift attention away from the problem of poverty; and (4) that effective housing mobility programs would constrain the choices of black families. Unfortunately these critics do not provide a clear vision of what a ghetto enrichment policy would entail.

Stephen Steinberg goes beyond a criticism of the poverty concentration literature to recommend that researchers avoid this type of study, since the results demonize the poor. This is bad advice for researchers. Were they to choose their research topics based on political correctness they would quickly lose their credibility, which is not currently at a very high point right now.

Any attempt to address inner-city poverty needs to strengthen black family structure. High rates of single-parent households and teenage pregnancies undercut efforts to promote stable racial and economic integration. Roger Wilkins makes the point that what is most needed ‘is stable families with at least one employed parent who is earning a decent wage’ (p. 262). Unfortunately, many civil rights leaders and some academics have rejected any discussion of weak family structure as racist, but the presidency of Barack Obama may open the window to such a discussion.

The major problem of The Integration Debate is its strong advocacy tone and the contributors’ unwillingness to seriously consider their opponents’ views. Housing mobility advocates and critics are shouting past one another. The quality of discourse must be raised in order to improve the prospects for racial, ethnic, and income integration. However, because residential segregation is such a hot issue in Europe, this book should be of interest to scholars and practitioners on both sides of the Atlantic.

Reference

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