

WHY THE SUBURBS?

Excerpts from Oscar Handlin's Fire-ball in the Night: The Crisis in Civil Rights.
Boston, 1964

"Blatant racists and bigots, as individuals, are a minority. They can readily be outvoted. . . they can exercise influence only when the inertia or passivity of the more moderate majority allows them to.

"More significant than the intransigence of the racists are the subtle shifts in the views of the majority of Americans who are not committed to the doctrines of white supremacy. In the North and in the South, most whites - moderately, liberally or enthusiastically - sympathize with aspirations toward equality and acknowledge the justice of the Negro's basic grievance. But they are unsure about their obligations toward him and are uncertain about the effects of change upon their own newly won security. They find themselves therefore trapped in a dilemma, the nature of which is most visible in the suburbs of the great cities.

"Affluence is relatively new to the majority in the metropolis. Many of its inhabitants can, if they wish, recall the hard days of the 1930's. They prize the gains they have made and resent any hint of the earlier precariousness.

"These people have left the inner core of the city; they wish to escape the disorders of the tenements and apartment districts which many of them knew in their youth and they look for the cosier stability and security of smaller communities. The single-family house is the symbol of the respectability they have won or inherited and it is also the appropriate setting for the family life this generation prizes so highly. . .

"The little house on Paradise Lane all too often rests on a shaky foundation. It is mortgaged to the hilt and its contents carry the heavy obligations of installment payments. Its owner, in the anxiety to provide the best possible nest for the family, has eagerly seized every credit opportunity and now huddles behind the shelter of twin safeguards: rising real estate prices protect the value of his home and moderate taxes limit the burden of operating costs. Naturally, he is sensitive to any development which might breach these defenses.

"Such people also consider education and proper community services of preeminent importance. From their own experience, they know the value of good schooling in opening the ways to careers, and they remain actively concerned with providing their children with the best chances possible. Indeed, the quality of its educational establishment is one of the magnets which lures them to the suburbs.

"Another is the ability to organize there the kind of small community which will meaningfully occupy their own time and link them with the oncoming generation. The revival of religion in the decades since the war involves less often a commitment to a theological doctrine than an opportunity to center around the church or synagogue a cluster of institutions in which adults can participate and with the aid of which children can properly be reared. The strengthening of ethnic ties and traditions springs from the same avid longing for roots which will support their families against the uncertain winds of an unstable world.

"The suburb then is not merely a mode of escape from the city, a means of evading the problem of strangeness, poverty, delinquency and mass education. It is that. But it is also the holding ground of positive values which are not negligible in our times. The dilemma facing its residents arises out of their desire to safeguard those values by isolating themselves from disturbing intrusions. In the 1960's such isolation may not be feasible.

"Toward the Negroes, the suburbanites exhibit good will conditioned by distance. Circumstances vary widely from one part of the country to another, of course. . . But in our society the better educated, the more stable and the more prosperous are the less prejudiced; and there is a high percentage of such people in the suburbs. A substantial majority of them believe in equality between the races - the moderates because it is inevitable, the liberals because it is desirable. They respond readily to the abstract pleas for brotherhood in The Defiant Ones and To Kill a Mockingbird.

* * * * *

"But while such people recognize the justice of the Negro's grievances, they are tempted to appeal for time and to console themselves with the little steps forward, while postponing the great leaps for the future. They are not revolutionaries and prefer change to come slowly. They are gradualists and desire to step cautiously. When the black man wishes to live on their block and the black child seeks to enter their children's school, the nightmare seizes them - all those problems they had hoped to leave behind in the central city are on the way to catching up with them.

The lesser fear is of the expense involved. Those whose homes are within the municipal limits of the metropolis have already felt their budgets suffer from rising local taxes mostly, they think, for services to the poor, aid to dependent children, welfare and costly remedial educational programs. Those who live in the outer towns often had fled there precisely to escape those burdens.

"The greater fear is of the disruption of the community. Anyone who wishes to read can learn that the presence of a Negro family does not itself depress property values; and in some places local fair housing committees try to educate the timorous. But if one comes in, others will follow and the olde timers will move away. Who will then support the church and how will they get in on the PTA, the social club, the cocktail party or the tea? What, that is, will happen to the neighborhood? There are rational answers to all these questions but the fearful are rarely in a listening mood."

* * * * *

"Since all but the doughtiest of the whites disclaim any ill will toward the colored people and profess a firm belief in equality, they are given to feelings of guilt about the discrepancy between their ideals and practices. But they are most likely to recognize those sentiments only when the blame is not too immediate or too personal. Hence they sympathize

deeply and sincerely when the distressing news comes from Mississippi or Alabama; and they absorb the rebukes of James Baldwin or Whitney Young masochistically or are inspired by Martin Luther King's injunctions to love one another. But the impassioned rhetoric suggests no feasible program and is a substitute for action rather than a goal to it."

* * * * *

ATTITUDES TOWARD POVERTY

"Perhaps the greatest enemy is the attitude that poverty is the fault of the poor themselves, the philosophy of rugged individualism, the creed that life is for the strong - as if the biological law of survival of the fittest by which the big fish eat the little fish were a good norm for human behavior. In its subtler forms, this philosophy merely claims that the poor don't care, or that the national government has no business solving personal problems. It will even quote scripture to prove that the poor we will have always with us. Christ did call our attention to the poor, but the only poverty he encouraged was voluntary poverty, not the grim destitution of people and little children; the only man he portrayed in hell was Dives, who refused to help a beggar! We have the poor to love and to serve - and we have too many."

Raymond A. Schroth, S.J.
Poverty, U.S.A., Church and World
Pamphlets No.1, Paulist Press 1965.

What Barbara Ward says about biases against the developing nations is applicable to biases against the domestic poor:

"It appears to be one of the unattractive features of the rich that they seem unable not to despise the poor. Think of the things that were said about the proletarians of the nineteenth century - proletarians of the nineteenth century - proletarians, because they were always producing children. Every time you gave them a wage increase - so went the argument - they would have ten more children.

"How much this resembles what one hears now about the developing societies . . . useless to give them economic assistance, because their birth rate is such that they can make no use of it! Or take the other great classic Victorian cliché - the coals in the bath. No good doing anything for the poor; give them a bathtub, and they will be sure to put the coals in it.

"This is too terribly like the talk you hear now . . . the old complaints reappear - feckless, idle, irresponsible people; if you pay them more, they work less. There is hardly a criticism made now about developing societies which was not used in the nineteenth century against the poor.

"And part of the reason is this bias, this inability of those who are already rich, competent, skilled, intelligent, not to feel in some way that all this is due to their own superior efforts and that therefore other people have failed in the human scale.

"Domestic experience shows that if society gives them the opportunity, the education, and the background to develop all their inherent skills, from being miserable proletarians they quietly turn into fine, upstanding consumers.

"I would like to bet that a hundred years from now people will look back on this period and say: 'What ridiculous things they used to say about the developing nations,' just as we look back now and say: 'Heavens, the things they used to say about the migrants!'"

Barbara Ward, Who Is My Neighbor?
Church and World Pamphlets No. 3
Paulist Press 1966.

* * * * *

Why are you speaking to us? Why hit the suburbs?

Need for representation, advocacy - the poor aren't organized, don't have political pressure. In the Depression, a large proportion of society was hit, so the government acted. Not politically necessary to help a minority poor now, unless their advocates (us) apply pressure.

(Cf. Harrington)

"Red tape and administrative complexity have taken the place of the old urban spoils system with the result that 'an important political link between the bureaucracy and the poor' has been eliminated. It is the white middle class that controls these services (welfare, etc.) and sets rules under which they are provided."

Washington Post, March 3, 1968

Willie Hardy says fight racism in the suburbs. An audience of mainly white in Arlington's Yorktown High School were told "it would be best if they kept their good intentions out of the ghetto and worked instead to combat suburban racism." (Willie Hardy, Director of Metropolitan Community Aid Council)

"I know you're bleeding from the heart and honest," Mrs. Willie J. Hardy told a young teacher, who was asking what she and others could do to help the ghetto. 'Let me tell you, the best way to help, sweetie, is right in your own community. Go out and tell those people they're racists,' she said."

Marion Barry, Assistant Director of Pride, Inc., agreed with Mrs. Hardy

"You can't come into my community and tell me what to do," he said. 'Let us solve our problems and you solve yours.' Eventually, he said, the two societies can come back together again. 'Right now,' he said, 'it's sterile dialogue.'"

"Barry later said, 'when you come into the ghetto with higher education levels and experience, you become the leader and it's the black people following the white people again.'"

Post, April 28, 1968

Paul Goodman, in the New York Times Magazine article on violence and the American Tradition:

Popular nonviolent confrontation "is a way of forcing the smug and powerful to recognize the existence of other people, and thereby to rediscover themselves as human beings rather than automata. It personalizes conflict and makes possible the re-establishment of community, since in the end we must all live together."

April 28, 1968

* * * * *

The problem is not that our nation cannot meet the problems of the poor, the question is will we. Our country has never been committed to overcoming poverty since the depression. Our national resources are sufficient, we are now seeking a national commitment, which must come from all areas, especially the suburbs.