

Modern American Apartheid, Insidious and Undeclared

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The infamous era of apartheid in South Africa shares a strikingly parallel path with racial apartheid in present day America. One is globally notorious, the other sophisticated and subtle.

Economic historians increasingly agree that racial economic inequality in America is worse than it was at any period in ancient Rome, or in slaveholding, colonial America during the late 18th century, or at the height of apartheid in South Africa.

South Africa's apartheid regime is remembered as one of the worst crimes against humanity of the 20th century.

Today, America is exhibiting many of the racial excesses of apartheid South Africa: extreme racial income inequality, apartheid schools, a racialised for-profit prison system, institutionally racist police practices, and residential re-segregation.

Residential apartheid is, without question, at the heart of the U.S. system of racial oppression. For almost a century, America has been racially divided into two societies: one, predominantly black and poor, located in the inner cities; the other, largely white and affluent, located in the suburbs. White Americans have kept their residential neighborhoods white since roughly 1920. Initially, by simply murdering African-Americans trying to move in.

Then, the black ghetto was created by whites during the first half of the twentieth century in order to isolate growing urban black populations. Historian Kenneth B. Clark explains how:

“the dark ghetto's invisible walls have been erected by the white society, by those who have power, both to confine those who have no power and to perpetuate their powerlessness. They are social, political, educational, and above all-economic colonies.”

American residential apartheid operated through a sophisticated patchwork system of racial non-laws and non-racial laws. Whites looking to keep their neighborhoods white knew that they could not rely on overt racial laws, so they relied on racial non-laws, such as restrictive covenants which restrict people of a certain race from moving into a given neighborhood. Then, you have the non-racial laws, such as zoning and mortgage supports. These laws are technically non-racial in the books, but have often been implemented in racial ways. Martin Luther King Jr. described these laws as camouflaged segregation that form a “system of internal colonialism.”

Despite the Fair Housing Act of 1968, segregation is perpetuated today through an

interlocking set of individual actions, institutional practices, and governmental policies. A Harvard University report on intergenerational mobility in the United States illustrates how one's Zip Code trumps talent when determining a child's future prospects. Despite social mobility and the American dream being nationwide ideals, ultimately, in apartheid America, the geographical and racial happenstance of one's birth is the key determinant of a child's future success.

The residential apartheid system used in South Africa was based on the native reservation system, first used by the American government. At a stroke, the passing of the Natives Land Act on 19 June 1913 saw the majority of South African land reserved for whites, or Europeans. Just 7 percent of agricultural land was set aside on reserves for blacks, despite Africans being 70 percent of the population.

Much like residential apartheid in America today, this Act created a self-fulfilling, downward spiral of poverty and degradation, which white segments of society point at in order to justify ongoing residential re-segregation.

Residential segregation inevitably creates apartheid schools. Six decades after the U.S. Supreme Court determined that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional in the landmark ruling *Brown vs. Board of Education*, we are witnessing the precipitous re-segregation of America's schools.

Black students are the most likely racial group to attend what researchers call "apartheid schools", which Harvard's Civil Rights Project describes as "virtually all non-white, with higher concentrations of poverty, much lower test scores, less-experienced teachers, and limited resources."

South African anti-apartheid hero Steve Biko once remarked that "the most powerful weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed." Apartheid in South Africa sought to create apartheid schools and utilize the education system as means of racial control and demobilization by establishing the Bantu Education Act. The Act ensured that black South Africans could not aspire to greatness, and they could be nothing more than cheap fuel for the highly profitable machine of Apartheid.

Impunity for white policemen and vigilantes who kill Blacks is yet another commonality between apartheid South Africa and modern American apartheid. Today, in the free and democratic United States, a black man will be killed every 28 hours by police, security guards or self-appointed vigilantes.

Black South Africans were only viewed as useful by the apartheid regime to the extent that they could provide cheap labour. The regime even enacted "pass laws" which required blacks to produce employment documents for any white person, police officer and 10-year-old white children alike.

One can clearly see parallels between the draconian "pass law" measure and the "stop-and-frisk" policies employed by the New York City Police Department. Latinos and Blacks make up 84 percent of all those stopped, although they make up respectively 29 and 23 percent of New York City's population. Furthermore, statistics show that NYPD officers are far more likely to use physical force against Blacks and Latinos during stops.

The "stop-and-frisk" policy is an excellent example of an ineffective policy that, under the

guise of upholding public safety, actively violates the rights of already disempowered communities of color.

The United States right now incarcerates more African-Americans as a percentage than South Africa did at the height of apartheid.

A Senate hearing on the Federal Bureau of Prisons reported that the American prison population hovered around 25,000 throughout the 1900s, until the 1980's when America suddenly experienced a massive increase in the inmate population to over a quarter million. The cause was Ronald Reagan's War on Drugs which intentionally, and disproportionately targeted blacks.

Historian Michelle Alexander illustrates how the drug war was part of a grand and highly successful Republican party strategy of using racially coded political appeals on issues of crime and welfare to attract poor and working-class white voters who were resentful of, and threatened by, desegregation and affirmative action.

Today, statistics show that white youth are more likely to use illegal drugs than black youth. Yet in some states, African Americans comprise eighty to ninety percent of all imprisoned drug offenders. Blacks are arrested for minor drug offenses because it is big business: there is the drug testing industry, prosecutors, police, lawyers, rehabilitation therapists, psychologists, parole officers, etc.

For decades, the African-American crime rate has been falling but black imprisonment rates have consistently soared. Aside from the War on Drugs, the rise in prison population may have another less publicized cause: gradual privatization of the prison industry, with its profits-over-justice motives. If the beds aren't filled, states are required to pay the prison companies for the empty space, which means taxpayers are largely left to deal with the bill that might come from lower crime and imprisonment rates.

The private prison system was designed by the rich and for the rich. The for-profit prison system depends on imprisoning blacks for its survival. Much in the same way the United States was designed.

Some argue that an African American rising to the pinnacle of power in the land of slavery is evidence that American apartheid does not exist. In fact, Mr. Obama is the poster-child of post-racialism: the idea that America is now devoid of racial preference, discrimination, and prejudice. On the contrary, post-racialism is in fact the new racism and a key aspect of American apartheid. Post-racialism pretends that there is equal opportunity while ignoring the institutional and economic racism that infects inner cities and fills prisons. Racial apartheid is stronger now because it operates under the guise that it doesn't exist and that race is no longer an issue in America.

Politically, morally, economically and philosophically, apartheid in America bares a striking resemblance to apartheid in South Africa. However, modern American apartheid is perhaps all the more abhorrent for being insidious and undeclared.

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