U.S.

# A Rising Tide Lifts All Yachts

## Why class-based social policy doesn't address African Americans' problems

TA-NEHISI COATES JUN 14, 2013

I've spent the last couple of months looking at the roots of white supremacists' policy, and the limits of color-blind policy in addressing its damage. A few weeks back, while debating Andrew over IQ differentials, I cautioned against comparisons between blacks and whites which claim to control for income and even wealth:

This is not merely a problem for your local diversity and sensitivity workshop. It is a problem of wealth and power. When you create a situation in which a community has a disproportionate number of poor people, and then you hyper-segregate that community, you multiply the problems of poverty for the entire community -- poor or not. That is to say that black individuals are not simply poorer and less wealthy than white individuals. Because of segregation, black individuals and white individuals of the same income and same wealth do not live in communities of equal wealth.

I also pointed to sociologist John Logan's research which points out that, on average, affluent blacks tend to live in neighborhoods with poorer resources than most poor whites. To understand this you must get that African Americans are the most segregated group in American history. Right now, at this very moment, the dissimilarity index -- the means by which we measure segregation -- is at the lowest point it's been in a century. Despite that, African Americans are still highly segregated.

To understand the profound consequences of segregation, consider this study by sociologist Patrick Sharkey -- "Neighborhoods and The Mobility Gap" -- which looks at how children fare when exposed to poverty. The answer, of course, is not well. Instead of trying to do a one-to-one match of African Americans and whites via income or wealth, the study considers African Americans and whites within the neighborhoods in which they live. The conclusions are generally not surprising:

Among children born from 1955 through 1970, only 4 percent of whites were raised in neighborhoods with at least 20 percent poverty, compared to 62 percent of blacks. Three out of four white children were raised in neighborhoods with less than 10 percent poverty, compared to just 9 percent of blacks. Even more astonishingly, essentially no white children were raised in neighborhoods with at least 30 percent poverty, but three in ten blacks were.

And more shockingly still, almost half (49 percent) of black children with family income in the top three quintiles lived in neighborhoods with at least 20 percent poverty, compared to only one percent of white children in those quintiles. These figures reveal that black children born from the mid 1950s to 1970 were surrounded by poverty to a degree that was virtually nonexistent for whites.

This degree of racial inequality is not a remnant of the past. Two out of three black children born from 1985 through 2000 have been raised in neighborhoods with at least 20 percent poverty, compared to just 6 percent of whites. Only one out of ten blacks in the current generation has been raised in a neighborhood with less than 10 percent poverty, compared to six out of ten whites. Even today, thirty percent of black children experience a level of neighborhood poverty -- a rate of 30 percent or more -- unknown among white children.

When you take an even more holistic look at poverty, it gets much worse:

Previous research has used a measure of neighborhood disadvantage that incorporates not only poverty rates, but unemployment rates, rates of welfare receipt and families headed by a single mother, levels of racial segregation, and the age distribution in the neighborhood to capture the multiple dimensions of disadvantage that may characterize a neighborhood.

Figure 2 shows that using this more comprehensive measure broken down into categories representing low, medium, and high disadvantage, 84 percent of black children born from 1955 through 1970 were raised in "high" disadvantage neighborhoods, compared to just 5 percent of whites. Only 2 percent of blacks were raised in "low" disadvantage neighborhoods, compared to 45 percent of whites. The figures for contemporary children are similar.

By this broader measure, blacks and whites inhabit such different neighborhoods that it is not possible to compare the economic outcomes of black and white children who grow up in similarly disadvantaged neighborhoods. However, there is enough overlap in the childhood neighborhood poverty rates of blacks and whites to consider the effect of concentrated poverty on economic mobility.

I strongly urge you to read this report. But in case you don't -- to summarize -- "the effect of concentrated poverty on economic mobility" is very, very bad:

The main conclusion from these results is that neighborhood poverty appears to be an important part of the reason why blacks experience more downward relative economic mobility than whites, a finding that is consistent with the idea that the social environments surrounding African Americans may make it difficult for families to preserve their advantaged position in the income distribution and to transmit these advantages to their children.

When white families advance in the income distribution they are able to translate this economic advantage into spatial advantage in ways that African Americans are not, by buying into communities that provide quality schools and healthy environments for children. These results suggest that one consequence of this pattern is that middle-class status is particularly precarious for blacks, and downward mobility is more common as a result.

When you hear people claiming that "class" can somehow account for the damage of white supremacy, or making spurious comparisons between Appalachia and Harlem, you should be skeptical. I have made those comparisons. But learning is the entire point of researching, writing, and reporting. I am learning that you can not simply wish the past away.

White-supremacist policy is older than this country. It begins with the slave codes in mid-17th-century colonial Virginia. It proceeds through the the 18th century, inscribing itself into our Constitution. It moves into the 19th century with such force that slaves alone were worth more than all the productive capacity of the country put together. War was waged to assure slavery's continuance. The war was lost. We had a chance to do the right thing. We didn't. So white supremacist policy endured. Even American liberalism's proudest moment -- the New Deal -- would be unimaginable without its aid. This era of policy did not close until the late 1960s, well within the living memory of many Americans.

In the face of this, liberals today are arguing that 300 years of immoral policy can be undone by changing the subject. If only we can fool white racists by helping black people under the guise of "class," maybe we can get out from under this. But the math says that black people are a class unto themselves. There is no "black and white" elite, no "black and white" middle class, no colorless poor. And when you consider that white supremacy is a dominant strain in our history, how could there be?

Almost twenty years ago, Deborah Malmud made a critique of class-based affirmative action (which is in vogue at the moment) which sticks with me:

Patterns of race-based class differentiation -- the fact that, in the aggregate, being the black child of a black lawyer means *something different* in the American social world from being the white child of a white lawyer -- are particularly problematic for the American vision of class mobility and racial equality. And a race-neutral program of class-based affirmative action will only submerge those patterns. In so doing, it will disserve the interests of the minority middle class.

I don't mean to be harsh or unsympathetic. It really is a terrible political problem. But you can't pretend it away. We are not going to trick the forces of history by appealing to color in our individual morality, and avoiding it when confronted with our national morality. Booker T. Washington already tried that. Red Summer was our reward.

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