



Analysis

Class/racial conflict, intolerance, and distortions in urban form: Lessons for sustainability from the Detroit region



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 October 2012

Received in revised form 20 September 2013

Accepted 14 October 2013

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Urban sustainability

Intra-generational equity

Racial and class discrimination

Suburbanization

Detroit

ABSTRACT

In this qualitative analysis into the equity conditions of urban sustainability, an examination is presented into the complexity of one particular aspect of intra-generational equity, racial and class discrimination and its role in distorting urban form and in generating resource inefficient and environmentally destructive human activity patterns. The article, therefore, focuses on the role of discrimination itself in encouraging ecological degradation. The Detroit region shows that racial and class conflicts can facilitate the shaping of the urban built environment as one population sub-group, largely white and upper-income, attempts to distance itself from another sub-group that is largely black, lower income, and considered a threat. The outcome is not only disinvestment and decline in the urban core, but also excessive suburbanization, as whites seek homogenous urban environments and use space to increase the distance between themselves and the black population. The study shows that the lack of cooperation and tolerance across ethnic/racial and class subgroups facilitates inefficient low-density and scattered developments, and excessive degradation of natural ecological systems.

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1. Introduction

While urban areas constitute some 2% of the Earth's land surface, urban dwellers consume over 75% of the Earth resources depleted in any year (Girardet, 2000). With most world resource stocks directed to urban areas – which are the aggregation of global wealth – cities are responsible for much of the global environmental degradation (Vojnovic, 2013). Cities themselves, however, do not have significant capacity in generating material resources, such as food and energy. Cities also have little ability to absorb or recycle waste and to clean air to any reusable extent, and they continue to discharge raw sewage into surrounding bodies of water (USEPA, 2004). Urban inhabitants rely on large natural areas beyond urban boundaries for resources and environmental services to meet the basic necessities of urban systems; leading Eugene Odum (1997, p. 290) to argue that cities are “parasites on the biosphere”.

Considerable interest has been devoted to changing consumption and development processes within cities, as evident with the global discourse on urban sustainability. In the US, sustainability discussions have focused particularly on the question of urban form. It is difficult to argue that there is a generic American city, since the built environment of high-density, pedestrian-oriented cities, like Boston, is very different from the built environment of low-density, automobile-oriented cities, like Phoenix. However, over half the American population lives in suburbs, with the rest split between urban and rural areas; a

settlement pattern that reveals the scale of US urban decentralization (US Census Bureau, 2000).

These decentralized development patterns also have clear racial and class imprints, white flight to the suburbs and the blackening of inner-cities, as illustrated by Metropolitan Detroit (Darden et al., 1987). Since the early-1970s, the majority of the US population living in metropolitan areas lived in suburbs, and this majority was overwhelmingly white. While the suburbs remain predominantly white, the 2010 Census has shown growing racial and ethnic diversity. In Metro Detroit, however, the racial divide has intensified. Some 83% of the city of Detroit population is black (US Census Bureau, 2011).

In exploring the complexity of the inter- and intra-generational equity requirements for advancing toward sustainability, we analyze one particular aspect of intra-generational equity; the role of discrimination – racial and class – in distorting urban form and in generating resource inefficient human activities. Racial and class conflicts shape urban form as one population sub-group, largely white and upper-income, attempts to distance itself from another sub-group that is largely black, lower income, and considered a threat. The result is excessive suburbanization, as whites seek homogenous urban environments and use space to increase the distance between themselves and blacks, a decentralization process known as white flight (Figs. 1–2). The resulting low-density and scattered developments facilitate excessive degradation of natural ecological systems and reduce regional economic performance and the overall welfare of cities.

This article focuses on the role of racism, a variable seldom considered in the sustainability discourse, in distorting housing markets and urban form, suppressing advancement toward urban sustainability. The analysis shows that racial and class discrimination contribute to

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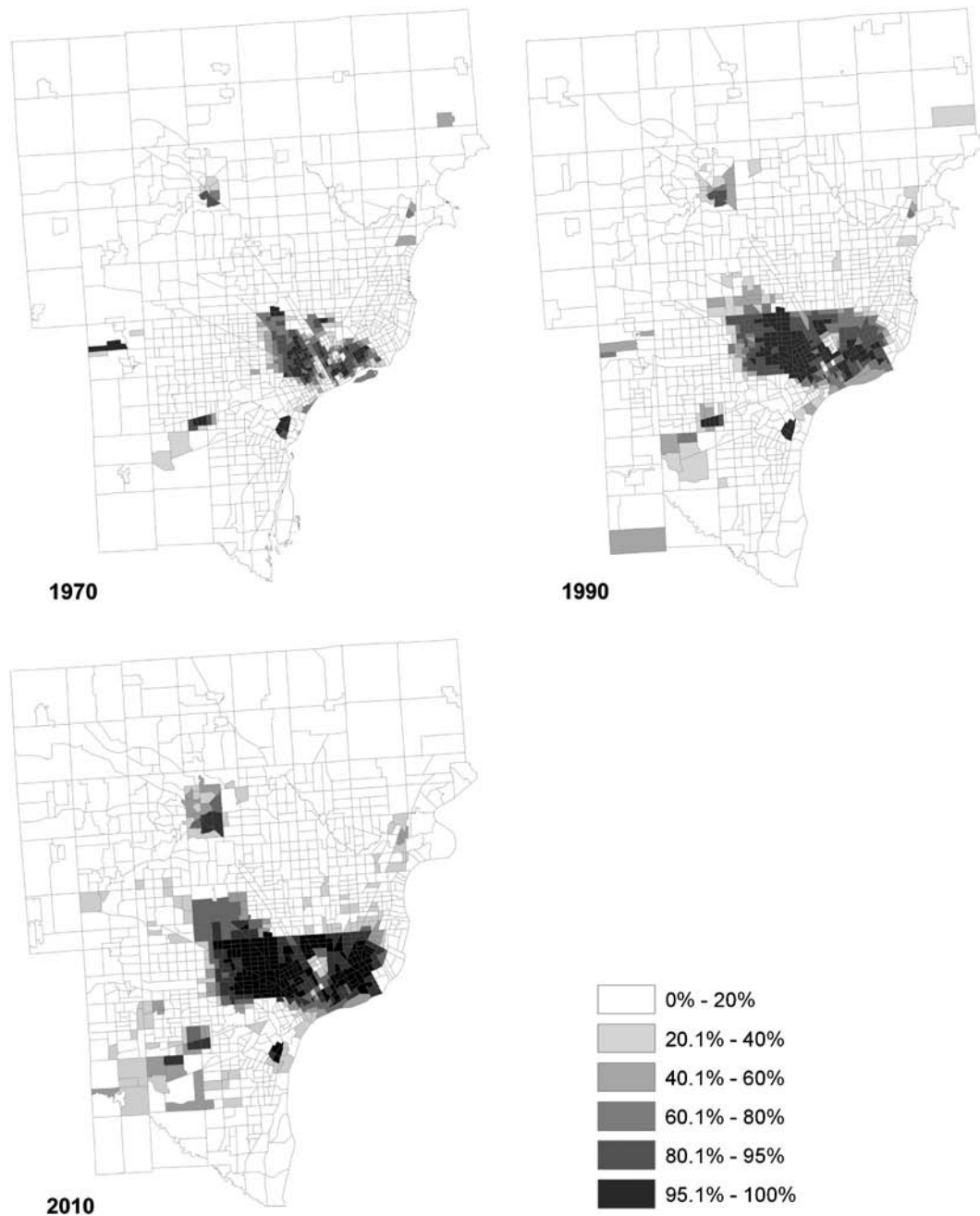


Fig. 1. Metropolitan Detroit, percent black (1970–2010).

ecological degradation, an underrepresented discussion in the sustainability debate. It also reveals that socially equitable, resource efficient, and environmentally benign outcomes can be achieved simultaneously, stressing the importance of pursuing urban sustainability.

After exploring the decentralization of Metropolitan Detroit, we will examine the complex dimensions – natural environmental, built, and socio-economic – of racial and class driven urban processes that hinder sustainability.¹ The study reinforces the inherent coupling between inter- and intra-generational equities by illustrating that by not pursuing intra-generational equity, in this context resolving racial

and class conflicts, communities encourage resource inefficiency and environmental degradation, hindering inter-generational equity and the pursuit of sustainability.

2. Class, Race and Sustainability

Environmental, social, and racial equity are inherently coupled, and this is clearly evident in the research on environmental racism. The notion that the poor and racial minorities are disproportionately exposed to environmental burdens began to receive attention during the 1980s. In 1979, the first environmental racism lawsuit on grounds of civil rights violation, *Bean versus Southwestern Waste Management*, was filed in Houston. Over the coming decades, studies on racial justice would further raise the prominence of environmental racism (Bullard, 2007). Research linking the environment and racism spans some four

¹ In the article, we refer to Metropolitan Detroit as the Tri-County area of Macomb, Oakland, and Wayne Counties. The wider SEMCOG (Southeast Michigan Council of Governments) region, we reference as the Detroit region. SEMCOG consists of Macomb, Oakland, Wayne, St. Clair, Livingston, Washtenaw, and Monroe Counties.

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