

Episode 213 - Dr. Henry Louis Taylor Jr.: The Economics of Urban Segregation (part 1 of 2)

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork. The podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.inSocialWork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of inSocialWork is to engage practitioners and researchers in lifelong learning and promote research to practice and practice to research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:37] Hello I'm your host Charles Syms and welcome to inSocialWork the 2010 U.S. Census found that almost 81 percent of Americans lived in urban areas with so much of the country's population living in cities. And considering the long established mission of social work to address the problems that can be found in urban communities it is crucial for social workers to understand how the development of the city in the United States has played a role in creating and maintaining the social and economic segregation that is so deeply woven into the fabric of most cities today. Henry Louis Taylor Jr. Ph.D. is professor and founding director of the Department of Urban and Regional Planning Center for Urban Studies at the University at Buffalo. Dr. Taylor also coordinates the Neighborhood Planning and Community Development specialization as well as teaches courses in Central City Revitalization urban management and Race Class and Gender in the city. He was interviewed in December of 2016 by Caitlin Beck. Ms Beck is an MSW student at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work and a member of the social work Podcast team. In this podcast, the first of two Dr. Taylor argues that there is an intentionality to how we build cities that ultimately produce the highly underdeveloped communities that we see and where marginalized populations will find themselves forced to live. He reasons that cities have become commodities in the land a source of wealth. Who lives where is reflective of the value of that land with the disenfranchised and marginalized groups being moved to the least desirable sections of the cityscape Dr Taylor explains that neighborhoods are important in determining the life outcomes for their inhabitants that there exist an entire relationship between people and the places where they live. He contends that institutions put into place to solve problems and bring about positive change in struggling communities are in fact failing in that mission and have shifted to simply easing the suffering and misery of that community's inhabitants. He ends this first episode explaining what we must face if we watch cities and a society that is different.

[00:03:15] Hello. Thank you to our listeners for stopping in. My name is Caitlin Beck. Today we are joined by Dr. Henry Louis Taylor Jr.. Dr. Taylor as you know we are so excited to have you on. Thank you again for joining us.

[00:03:30] It's a tremendous pleasure and I'm always glad to have an opportunity to talk with my friends over in the world of social work.

[00:03:38] We are so glad to have you too. Dr. Taylor so your research concentrates on a historical and contemporary analysis of distressed urban neighborhoods the social isolation they face and the related race and class issues among people of color. So based off of your research why have you found that race and class segregation is interwoven into the very way that we build cities and metropolitan regions.

[00:04:08] My work is concerned with situating the development of underdeveloped neighborhoods and communities within the larger context of metropolitan regions and look specifically at trying to understand how is it the way that we build cities or why is it that way we build cities produce certain kinds of challenges for our communities of color. One of the single most important things that I discovered in this research is trying to understand what we call the metropolitan city building

process is the discovery that the very way that we build cities. Automatically produces highly underdeveloped areas of the metropolis where. African-Americans people of color including immigrants and refugees and low income whites are forced to live. And so that raises the larger question of why is it. That the way we build the cities automatically creates these. Types of environments. The fundamental reason is that we've turned the city into a giant commodity where the idea is to make as much money as we possibly can from the development of the land. So in the design and the construction of Buffalo or any city in the United States for that matter there are basic principles that urban planners and city builders. Always. Always follow. Number one is if they attempt to. Separate. Or segregate homeowners from renters. Second they seek to segregate high income groups from low income group. And third they force the lower income groups to live on the most undesirable residential lands in the city. Or the metropolitan region and those undesirable lands are typically located near railroad tracks near waste dumps near major highways thoroughfares are places where there are high levels of noise air and water pollution or they are located in the oldest most dilapidated parts and sections of the city. Another kind of shortcut of thinking about things in those days is that these neighborhoods are located in those locations in places where no one would want to live if they have a capacity to move to some other location and plates. And so these are also the areas where the land is the cheapest. From a residential point of view and the most inexpensive hence the most undesirable. Now what is considered desirable or undesirable is constantly changing they're not fixed in time and place. So if a community and other developed community is located in a part of the city that is highly undesirable and if for some reason it doesn't really matter that land now becomes desirable then those low income people who live there will be forced to relocate or move. And that's how the classical patterns of gentrification work. So the bottom line is that in order to generate and create profit. We build cities that segregate people on the basis of income on the basis of race and on the basis of the type of housing that they live in

[00:08:26] and we see this in our own city in Buffalo. As I'm sure we see it in other cities as well.

[00:08:32] Exactly. I mean if you take a look at let's say Erie County. Think of Erie County as a big residential neighborhood and you look at the suburban areas. That's where you're going to find a high income housing. And that's where you're going to find the highest levels and highest rates of homeownership and you're also going to find that in Erie County close to 82 percent of all whites live outside of the city in the county. And that would be in the suburban communities while 78 percent of African-Americans live within the context of the city itself. Now with the city of Buffalo this pattern continues with the best and most developed neighborhoods being on the west side and the west side is interesting because on the west side you have a classic pattern of higher income groups being segregated from lower income groups. But a situation where within these higher income groups they live in neighborhoods with both upscale rental properties as well as owner occupied housing units with the worst housing and the worst living conditions on the east side and on the far west side where the old industrial lands used to be situated

[00:09:55] right Dr. Taylor and what are the implications of building metropolitan regions in this matter.

[00:10:02] Well it has a twofold impact and that impact stems from the fact that neighborhoods matter neighborhoods are not just benign neighborhoods matter and they matter because we have this very very powerful relationship between place and people so people not only act on place but the places in which they live also act on them. So neighborhoods are a prime determinant of people's outcome lives outcomes. And so in instances where you have highly developed neighborhoods and communities where the living conditions are very good where they feel a very strong social institutions and social relationships among groups of people who live there where they have very very strong institutions in place to mitigate whatever problems and challenges that they

have. And these can be institutions that are both inside of the neighborhood and outside of the neighborhood. But have Prime responsibility for serving the people inside of those neighborhoods in those instances we can anticipate that the life chances of people are going to be very very good. And by that I need to say that many individuals will be able to achieve the goals that they set for themselves. They will be able to live a happy and healthy life. On the flip side neighborhoods that are underdeveloped. There is an overwhelming abundance of data that supports the idea and notion that in these kinds of communities our neighborhood has have very adverse effects on virtually every aspect of life. So for example in these communities neighborhoods are going to enable that conditions are going to produce undesirable health outcomes. And what that means is that people in these communities are going to live shorter lives and that the quality of those lives are going to be much less than their counterparts in the more highly developed neighborhoods and communities neighborhoods will also impact the educational outcomes of the kids so that we can expect that the quality of schools the challenges that people face getting to schools the inability for them to provide the experiences and the supports that they need back home all of those things collectively are going to impact on their educational outcomes and those outcomes are going to be undesirable. It also means that people are more likely to encounter obstacles and difficulties that will drive them toward risky behavior. I don't say that because a lot of times it's easy to blame risky behavior on the individuals themselves without looking at the social context is that influence and contribute to those is great. You take two people one person lives out in Clarence the other person lives down on Perry Street and one of the dilapidated houses around the housing development in that community say they both work. One guy just simply works his regular eight hour day. The other guy works two jobs sometimes three jobs if you count the work that he does on the weekends. One person comes home the guy in Clarence walks in the door. He is stressed really stressed. He comes in and pushes a but sweet music comes on. Looks around really feels good about his house situation and his circumstances quickly change his clothes jumps into his Porsche and drives about a half a mile away to L.A. Fitness works out and at the end of his workouts he heads back to the place lays down and watches Television on His 54 inch plasma TV screen. That's one reality. The other guy gets home. The house doesn't make him feel any better. In fact it makes him feel worse about himself and his circumstances because he starts to look at all of the stuff that needs to be fixed. The shabby environment the setting. Just Angry and there's nothing about the abode that cools him off. So instead of going to the gym which he couldn't afford even if he had a car to get there he just walks around to the local liquor store buys him a half a pint of gin goes over to a buddy's house and they sit there drinking and smoking dope all night. You can say that the other guy. Is involved in risky behavior that can lead to some very detrimental health outcomes. But the reality is that he has limited opportunities to relieve the stress. Limited opportunities to get away from the cot the issues that he faces so the larger point that I'm making is that within the context of these neighborhoods folks are confronted with all kinds of obstacles and challenges that gets in the way of everything that they do and the institutions that serve them are failures and institutions and failures because they don't solve the challenges that they face in civil societies. We build institutions to mediate and mitigate problems. That's why the institutions exist so if institutions don't do the jobs that they are supposed to do then the people suffer. And so we turn the world upside down by saying that the people are suffering it's their own fault and the institutions are set free. And then the institutions see it as their jobs and responsibilities. Not eliminating and solving problems but easing suffering and misery. Easing suffering and misery. And most of the institutions don't work the way they're supposed to. I mean I've worked with Poland cars and the county of Erie trying to look at how we can make sense out of the social service institutions. And I step back after almost a year of looking at all of these institutions and how they work and operate and run and said You have to redesign your entire delivery system. Starting with a public health system that has the responsibility of creating healthy neighborhoods and communities and they don't even know that that's their job. They don't even have a sense that that is their responsibility.

[00:17:25] I want to point out just how in the School of Social Work we would just say that you are

so trauma informed when you're talking about these populations are these people who are making riskier decisions. You're not asking the question what's wrong with them. You're not saying they're doing these things because they are evil or because they are ignorant. You're saying what's happening to them. What are the adverse experiences that caused them to make the decisions they're making.

[00:17:54] You take a lot of the kids for example. And this goes back to the larger questions we've created that environment. The state created. The state maintains it. And that's the important thing to understand. It's a deliberately created environment that people are trapped there. One of your professors Carly Patterson and someone else over there wrote a very significant piece that talks about folks literally stuck in place and the outcome of that is that the barriers of rent the barriers of access to other locations and places are erected to keep them from going there. And so we create the settings. Now once those settings are created. The trauma that they experience in other parts of the characteristics of the community. That we create those for example crime. And violence that occurs inside of the neighborhoods in the community. So I would suspect that the number of kids living in these neighborhoods suffering from some version of post-traumatic syndrome is probably astronomically high. I mean how could they not be. When you put a human face on premature deaths which is epidemic if not pandemic in these neighborhoods with two deaths people dying before there's not supposed to people seeing friends murdered and killed or as one girl came to school. The day after she was grazed by a bullet. You know there was no special help for her. I don't know but if I was grazed by a bullet that had been just one half inch the other direction I wouldn't be here. I would be in trouble. I'd be traumatized. But we. Go out of our way to keep political consciousness from being forged in these communities because the reality is the state would rather have black people killing black people in that environment than in that environment producing black revolutionaries who are demanding change. Give them a choice. Thief and murderer or black revolutionary in neighborhood X, 10 out of 10 times 10 out of 10 times they choose murderer and thief. Ten out of ten times. And so and I'm saying that because during the 1900s and 70s and into the 80s the United States government developed an organization called COINTELPRO the counter intelligence program and they deliberately suppress the. Left movement in the African-American community. I mean these were the same people that sent Martin Luther King a letter telling him if he didn't commit suicide they would tell his wife about his infidelities. So again the larger issue that I'm making is that these environments. Are. Consciously constructed and intentionally maintained and that it will take an enormous effort and commitment on the part of people to change them but they can be changed.

[00:21:42] And you've spoken to this already a little bit but can you speak more to why. Why are we building these societies and sustaining them.

[00:21:52] For one reason and one reason only. It's about money. The city is a commodity it's a commodity a commodity where wealth isn't vain. The buying and selling of land its utilization about buying and selling of land. I'm not only including the soil itself but the properties and structures that are built are that we're talking about industries where millions are trillions of dollars are made from the buying and selling of homes. Real Estate. You're talking about decisions about where you're going to locate big apartment buildings and big hotels. That's a land development. You're talking about the maximum amount of rents that you can charge for apartments that are located in prime places. You're talking about land that you want to convert into tourist attractions so that people will come to the city and spend money. You're talking about land that might get converted into a retail establishment. So once it's developed into a retail establishment multiple dollars are made dollars are made from the person who actually sells the land to the developer then the money is made from the bankers who finance the deal. Then money is made from the person who builds the building the builder. The money is made from the person who manages the property then money is made from all of the people who supply the building materials land. This money is

the sources of wealth. So because of that you want to maximize the utilization of land in order to produce profits. So if you've got a bunch of low income poor people living in the fruit belt the developers know they can make more money off of that land. If they convert it into high income rentals they can make more money off of that land if they can build more and bigger expensive houses they can make more money off of that land if they use it for the construction of a research center or hotel or even a parking lot. It's about putting profits over people. That's what it's about and that's what the American dream is all about. Dreaming about profits and money and profits and money will always trump (pun intended) people. And that's the ugly reality that we don't want to face but that we must face. If we want to create something that is fundamentally different.

[00:25:05] This is your host Charles Syms and you have been listening to part one of Dr. Henry Louis Taylor's discussion on the economics of urban segregation. We hope that you will join us for part two as Dr. Taylor continues his conversation on this topic. So please join us right here at inSocialWork.

[00:25:33] Hi I'm Nancy Smyth Professor and Dean of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history or online and on the ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our website at www.SocialWork.buffalo.edu. And while you're there check out our technology and social work research center you'll find that under the Community Resources menu.