

Episode 215 - Dr. Henry Louis Taylor Jr.: The Economics of Urban Segregation (part 2 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.

[00:00:38] Hello I'm your host Charles Syms and this is inSocialWork. Before we begin this episode I'd like to tell you all that this will be my final podcast as one of your host. Over the last four years I've been part of a team that has brought to you over 100 interviews with scholars and practitioners who are making an impact on the profession of social work. My time here has been exciting thought provoking and fun. In our time together we have explored a number of diverse topics such as evidence based practices social justice issues social welfare policy and technology and social work. So I want to say thank you all for listening and goodbye. I leave you in the immensely capable hands of the social work team and I do hope you will keep listening. Now onto the podcast in part one of this two part podcast, Dr. Henry Taylor argued that there is an intentionality in how U.S. cities are built that ultimately lead to the highly underdeveloped communities that we see in them. In this the second part Dr. Taylor begins with a comprehensive description of what he means by underdeveloped communities. From there he introduces the topic of the just city Dr. Taylor offers an image of how a just city would look very different from the underdeveloped urban communities that are unfortunately all too familiar in today's US cities. In developing the just city concept, Dr. Taylor outlines an important connection between social work and urban planning. He expresses his belief in the necessity of Social Work intervention as well as describes a role for social work in the creation of just communities. Finally Dr. Taylor uses his research and experiences in Cuba to provide a framework of what a just community might look like. He describes how a society with very limited resources has been able to create highly developed communities in an effort to meet the needs of its inhabitants in doing so placing people over profits. Henry Louis Taylor Jr. Ph.D. is a professor in the University at Buffalo School of Architecture and Planning. He is also the founding director of the Department of Urban and Regional Planning Center for Urban Studies at the university. 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.

[00:03:42] Dr. Taylor. You have talked about blacks Latino's immigrants and refugees along with low income whites living in these underdeveloped neighborhoods with these people's realities in mind. How do we define underdeveloped neighbourhoods.

[00:04:01] We've been fighting a war for some time. Over how to describe the conditions of life that people live under. And. That. War has centered around and part how do we conceptualize the places where they live. So you see all kinds of terms pop up over the years disadvantage. Oh it's a disadvantaged neighborhood. Low income. Poor. Ghetto. All of those terms are either nouns or adjectives but they don't tell us much about the conditions of life that are found there or why those conditions of life exist. So at the Center for Urban Studies we develop the concept underdeveloped and by underdeveloped we're talking about underdevelopment that occurs at four Highly Interactive levels first underdevelopment in terms of the physical environment. That means that the housing is often substandard that the sidewalks aren't kept and maintained that it may be filled with vacant lots and abandoned properties situated near sources of pollution air water noise. Without the appropriate level of buffers and by that I mean if you look at the east side neighborhoods which are often situated near railroad tracks there are ways on you compare the tree and green coverage infrastructure of those communities with the green infrastructure on the west side. You are struck by

the differences in terms of trees shrubbery and other Bushes things that cleans the air. That's a form of under development are aged water and sewage lines under development. Then at the level of social institutions or social processes we see and informal structures weakened social neighborhood based social organization weakened levels of organizations with neighborhoods and communities that are under development. We see that and often in many instances that institutions that are meant to provide services for these populations and group lack the capacity or the resources to do the things that they are supposed to do. That's under development. So under development is a deliberate and conscious process because it's related to a combination of the investments that you choose to make in a location. The policies that you put into place to protect people. The emphasis that you place on the development of the institutions that are situated and located in there then you can easily look at areas that are being developed and you can see that their realities are very different. And the difference between an East Side neighborhood and a West Side Neighborhood is just a question of development. And so the challenge at that point in time becomes how can we systematically develop these communities. And what are the forces that are under developing them how can we stop those forces and how can we change the trajectory of the community. Because it's an issue of development.

[00:07:49] And Dr. Taylor for our listeners outside of Buffalo I'll just add that the fruit belt and the east side and the west side are all parts of Buffalo.

[00:07:59] There are parts of Buffalo and many places have them the Fruit Belt is a state where your medical campus and your medical centers are located and situated are city like most cities have been stratified on the basis of race. And at this particular moment of time you get blacks mostly on the East whites mostly on the West and Latino or Latino Xs and immigrants and refugees on the most underdeveloped lands on the western side of the city.

[00:08:32] Thank you for that. First of all that definition of underdeveloped neighborhoods I think that you're so right that especially for me growing up I learned about just the word ghetto or the words poor neighborhood but never knew what that really meant except for the drives we might take some of those neighborhoods sometimes. I never really knew a definition of those places. So you've talked about the experiences that people are having in these neighborhoods so adverse experiences related to risky behaviors or are related to alcoholism and things like this. And so wonder with those things considered. What connection do you see between social work and urban planning.

[00:09:19] Well I see a very very very powerful connection and we worked on a project actually a few years ago where I was leading a team that was developing a redevelopment strategy for the parish choice neighborhood which is that area down where the Commodore Perry housing developments are located. And as a part of our planning strategy I'll go was to build a partnership with social work and we were going to unleash an army of progressive social workers into that community. This is what I see as a connection. We know that in these neighborhoods and communities individuals and families are going to be confronted with huge challenges of fundamental part of the process of transforming the neighborhoods and communities is to transform the people who live there to increase the levels of consciousness develop a powerful sense of collective efficacy. Develop a powerful sense of critical consciousness which means that they have a deep understanding of the conditions of life under which they live and they properly attribute those conditions of life to the policies the choices and decisions of people who control the community and who live outside of that community and by collective efficacy mean that they have a sense that if they band together and work as a single team and if they are uniting with others in other neighborhoods and communities that they have the power to recreate a future that serves them that they can in fact change their realities. But in order to do that they need help and they need partners. And by that I mean folks who are prepared to work with them to meet those specific

challenges and this is where we're progressive social workers come in and a progressive social worker is one that understands that their job is to work with the people who live in the neighborhoods and communities looking at their activities at that level. Their job is to help people acquire the capacity and the abilities to believe in themselves and to work with them as partners to help them meet the challenges that they face. And we need professionals to do that. And we recognize that the lone individual won't be able to do that by him or herself that we need folks who are prepared to set and work with these families to resurrect this knowledge and understanding of how to give to the kids that they have and how to work through the variety of enormous problems that they may face in trying to get to a state of social and mental wellness. And so the social worker in my view must be an integral part of a larger multisectioned team that is fighting to transform and redevelop the neighborhood and the community and their job is to help reconstruct and rebuild in partnership with the people who live in these communities. The social processes and the social institutions and the social networks that would allow us to drive the transformation of the communities in which residents live. That's my view.

[00:13:16] My next question which you've spoken to, might be part of that but so you've suggested that we do not have to build cities that are segregated based on race and class. Can you speak more to this.

[00:13:29] Policy makers and urban leaders, They like to see you trapped. Between these two options. Build the highly segregated neoliberal city with its senses of prosperity or allow the city to be the same troubled dilapidated and rundown place that we all wish to transform and change. So you're caught. Either I go along with the policies that build cities this way. In other words if I build cities with white people at different levels of development and even there in a hierarchical way that is painful or I do nothing. And I think there's a third way and I always call for let's go the third way. And by the third way I'm talking about building a just city and just city. I mean the creation of policies projects programs and activities that will change the way those folks at the bottom of the economic order live and carry out their lives. Let me give you a couple of examples of what I'm talking about. We may not be able to eliminate low incomes and poverty but we can do is change what it means to have low incomes and be poor. It means that we can generate laws that demand that rental housing reaches a minimum level of acceptable quality while at the same time capping rents so that housing burden becomes a thing of the past. Now that means that we have to identify resources that we can be utilized for subsidies to support the gaps that will result from raising the quality and lowering the rents. But we do that by putting social development taxes on businesses say for example in Buffalo New York. Right now we were to establish an East Side Development Foundation and say we would say to all business owners in the region 10 percent of your profits should go into this fund. I mean you've got the other 90 percent of your profits. Well if we had those levels of resources coming from the businesses that exist inside of the area then you have a pool of money that is available to engage in unique ways of raising the quality of the housing in which individuals lives so that we can begin to transform and redevelop the east side neighborhoods say we changed our approach to education and schooling so that now we have all of our schools situated with curriculums that allow them to engage in the development of cities of the neighborhoods in which their schools are located and say we forge forward strategies of turning vacant lots and abandoned buildings and the works of arts and various parks and that the schools in these neighborhoods along with the block clubs and the other institutions are now responsible for the maintenance of these activities and we allow the maintenance of these activities to become publicly supported jobs and that we begin to redirect funds as crime and other activities go down. And we don't need to finance the police and other operations this way and we create other levels of jobs and opportunities. So what I'm saying is that we have to imagine or imagine the city as a just a place really imagine what it would be required in order to build that kind of location and place. We could change the way our schools and departments I'm talking about the university operates where instead of continuing to teach students to do stuff that we know won't work. We turn programs into

experimental design pieces. I mean let me give you one example. There's a lot of stuff that we do in urban planning that we know it doesn't create the city but we don't make building a just city. The foundation of our curriculum where all of our professors are coming up with innovative and creative ideas. We're turning the city into a lab where with thinking about all of these issues and questions. So my point is that we can imagine a different type of city. We can imagine different types of relationships that would exist among the professionals that would allow us to create places that would have very different outcomes from the places that we have now and I'll start point and all of that will be we will no longer do stuff that we know don't work.

[00:18:49] Yeah and it's not working. I was at a meeting in a fruit belt on the east side and it was just a place of hurt and fear from the community members that were there expressing the real fear that they would be kicked out very soon from this neighborhood. And one woman in particular looked at all of the white people in the room and said You are the ones who are moving into our neighborhood and the fear was so real and it absolutely made sense. And it wasn't directed correctly because these people were all there to help. But it made so much sense. The fear that was there.

[00:19:28] Well the fear was based on the fact that in 1900 and 70 in the fruit belt 9132 black people lived in that community. 9132. Fast forward some 35 36 years later. 1500 live in that community. So when people talk about. And in 19 since 2000, 16 years ago 65 percent of the population in the borough has been displaced. So the fear is. I don't know. It's not so much here is just the reality. This is fear is more akin to something that you don't know or that you think might occur but you're not quite sure this is something that has happened. This is just a statement of fact.

[00:20:25] Dr. Taylor. For those of our listeners who don't know you've done research on Cuban society what connection if any is there between your research with Cuba and the neighborhoods there and neighborhoods in the United States.

[00:20:42] Well. When I started looking at underdeveloped neighborhoods and communities and started to try to understand why they were this way with the intent of the forging and developing strategies that could be used to change them and turn them into much better places to live and work. At that moment in time I didn't know why. These neighborhoods persisted. I was always struck by a very powerful article that Gilbert Osofsky wrote and it was called The Enduring Ghetto. Osofsky said that. The black community would literally changeless that we watch over overtime and the conditions of life remained essentially the same. He recognized that change did not mean that it looked the same way in 1960 as it did in 1840. What he was saying the actual conditions of life that characterize these places remain essentially unchanged. So I was curious to see is this just a natural way that cities are built. Are these the result of public policy choices and decisions that people were making. And so I started looking at other locations and places around the world. I took a look at what was happening in the Soviet Union. At the time I went on a very interesting trip to Russia and for the first time in my entire life I saw. Communities that I could not tell who lived there simply on the basis of the conditions inside of that neighborhood and community and it began to really reinforce the idea that conditions of life were driven by policy and political ideology. Then in 1999 I had an opportunity to go to Cuba with the study abroad program that we were just developing in the city at that time at the University of Buffalo at that time and I jumped on the opportunity. I'd never been to Cuba but this was an opportunity to really take a look at a poor country with limited resources. But an ideology that place people over profits. And I wanted to know if in fact these neighborhoods in these communities were different than the ones that I've found here in the United States I think one of the most amazing things that I discovered was that at one level the physical quality of the neighborhood in terms of the deterioration of the physical environment they were pretty bad. It was very bad. In some respects. One could even argue they were worse than physical conditions inside of the United States. But the neighborhood effects was fundamentally different. Across all. Variables. And what the Cubans were doing is that they did not eliminate. Poverty. And

low incomes but they were eliminating what those things meant. And by that I mean to say they created. Highly developed neighborhoods where people were highly organized. Then they deliberately and intentionally strengthened the institutions inside of those neighborhoods and communities. So they used a concept in which social development was the engine that drove that community. So they established on the health front for example the doctor and nurse program where they brought in every single neighborhood a doctor and nurse program where the doctor and nurses provided services healthcare services for a population no greater than 135 families. And they provided them with those the care and the treatments that they needed. Then they established literally every several blocks food stores Markets where you could get fresh fruits and vegetables walk away and so even in the absence of refrigeration it didn't matter because the food was fresh and they moved away from providing folks with processed foods. Exercise and activity was made part of the culture and in literally every two or three blocks there was a place a gym where you could work out. Walking was the cultural norm along with biking all over the place at the neighborhood scale. They built these kinds of institutions. Then they established an amazing parasocial work program where kids from neighborhoods who were trained as social workers. A couple of years they weren't professional social workers in our terms but they were trained as social workers then sent back to the neighborhoods to work with the folks. And as one social worker told me said Professor Taylor we don't have money but our job is to work with residents to show them how to solve problems. So they prove that through social interventions even if you cannot transform the physical environment you could nonetheless mitigate a number of the issues that related to the social determinants of negative outcome. be they health be they education be they employment and the like. And so what that taught me was that neighborhood design is everything and that the key element of all of our intervention strategies has to start with the organization of people and the development of institutions that provide them with the services that they need.

[00:27:32] How good it is hear that this just city that you talk to us about that it exists somewhere that isn't just in our imagination that it can be sustainable and that it may not have the wealthiest class thriving and living off the poor but that is a good thing and it's a very good thing.

[00:27:54] And the other thing that they did which was also quite profound and again something that is within our reach is that these neighborhoods that were physically challenge were neighborhoods that they intentionally and deliberately made cross-class neighborhoods so that you had people from all kinds of income groups that were living and situated in these places which meant the population base of the community was changed was strengthened but was strengthened in a way where the people who lived in these places didn't see just see them in the places but they were both in the places and all the places. And this is why the organizational structure was so important because it was an organizational structure. So the minute you moved into a neighborhood you could get sucked into that organizational structure that would connect and tie you to other people who lived in the neighborhood and the community so that you became a part of the solution to its transformation and develop.

[00:28:58] So Dr. Taylor back to the United States. I wonder how Donald Trump is now the president elect of the United States. What do you think a Trump presidency means for blacks.

[00:29:11] People of color and even low income whites there are a couple of responses that are. One is that I think that it allows us to escape from illusions. Many people in this country especially progressive thought we were trapped between the lesser of two evils. Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump. But if you looked a lot very closely at their policies not just what they said but what they did. Not much difference between what they were going to do it was going to be bad with both of them. If Hillary Clinton had been elected I think it would have been a lot easier for people to go back to sleep pretend that everything was OK and good. If you ever watch this movie The Matrix.

[00:30:02] Yes I have.

[00:30:04] Yeah. I think that should be required for everybody. But in the matrix you had a choice between the blue and the red pill and most people wanted this blue pill where they could take that blue pill and drift into blissful ignorance. In the United States where blue pill people get a blue pill and let me chase it down with a glass of gin. I want the blue pill so that we can move our little lives pretending that things are happy when they really are. Donald Trump forces us to take the red pill to save the world as it really is. The Make no mistake Donald Trump will do things very differently than others would have done because of his approach to domestic and international issues. So it's like being eaten by a bear versus or killed by a bear versus killed by a snake. You know you'll both die. But the way you'd die would be different. So I think we're in a situation where we can anticipate policies that will come down. And I think that those policies will create suffering and hardship. But I also think it will create an opportunity for us to fight back against those issues and battle to improve conditions. So. My prediction is that in four years we'll be better off than we are today. Yes. We organize and fight back. As a people. If we do not organize and fight back as a people the conditions of life will be much worse. But Trump is like a bully. He's going to come in and try to take stuff away from you and treat you poorly. And like any bully you're going to be forced to make a choice to let this person walk all over me and do whatever he wants to to me or do I stand my ground. And I fight back. Now for me I'm an incredibly optimistic person. Now I'm the kind of person I need to see the reality. I hate to disappoint anybody but I'm a Red pill guy gives me the red pill because once I understand what I am facing then I believe I have the confidence and the abilities to win every single time. And I also believe that the American people are that way. I'm an historian and an urban planner. I call myself a time traveler. I'm as comfortable and happy and 1865 as I am and 2092. The future. And to me the journey between the past and the future is just that it's the journey with its twists and changes. But the more understand the past the more I can understand. Know the present. The more I can gain perspectives and insights for the future so my knowledge and understanding of the past says to me several things. One is that the American people always march. From Darkness Into the Light. We don't march from light into the darkness. number two over the period of time the American people including those of us in the United States continually win victories and in the United States we face slavery. But we won the battle against slavery. We sent it to the dustbins of history. We fought racist Jim Crow segregation and we defeated it sent it to the dustbin of history. We fought women's suffrage issue when women could not vote and control that aspect of life. We won the victory and sent it to the dustbin of history. Across the dimensions of time and space over and over and over and over again we went. Now I've learned. That not only do we win. But that when blacks and whites and other people of color unite. That's always the formula for progression. Whenever we fight our battles alone and singularly we stumble and falter. United we win the fight. We stumble. And the final part is that these struggles are protracted. They take time. They don't happen overnight. These are not events. These a process. So. That's the foundation and the basis of my optimism. So I'm not afraid of Donald Trump and his gang of despicable. Because at the end especially if the American people especially if the people in the United States you name it then we will send Donald Trump to the dustbins of history. And the reason I say the American people and always talk about that I'm talking about are continental citizenship and within that Continental citizenship we share the history of being a slave Hennesy a slave hemisphere that its people were born of a fusion between the African. European and the native folks would hold the continent on this planet with that fusion that connectivity that makes us all Americans are common folk. And so within the United States we have our own unique American experience that unique American experience in the United States is hired by thousands of bands to the experiences of other Americans across our great continent.

[00:36:58] Dr. Taylor thank you so much. Listening to you is taking the red pill if that makes sense. You call people to be awake and to be conscious. And I especially I'm grateful because I think that not only have you spoken about the real issues behind the way we build cities and the way that we

sustain cities. But clearly you've just spoken to and throughout the whole podcast the real hope there is to see change that this isn't the end and that even with the current state of politics it might look like the end but it just isn't. So I thank you for both of those things. Thank you so much for being with us today.

[00:37:45] Thank you. It's been my pleasure.

[00:37:48] You have been listening to part two of Dr. Henry Louis Taylor's discussion on the economics of urban segregation. We hope you have found this topic and the discussion to be engaging. Please join inSocialWork again as we bring you another topic of importance to the profession of social work.

[00:38:16] 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