

**Thomas C. Schelling (1971), “Dynamic Models of Segregation,” *Journal of Mathematical Sociology*.**

Schelling builds an early agent-based account of how mild individual “tastes” about neighbors can reflect stark spatial patterns. He starts with a simple simulation on a checkerboard: agents from two groups occupy cells, each comparing the share of like neighbors to a personal tolerance; if the mix falls below that tolerance, they move to a vacant cell, and the system iterates. He complements this with an analytic model of “compartmented space” and a discussion of neighborhood “tipping,” where small composition changes push an area toward one group’s dominance. The central result is striking: even when no one desires segregation per se, local moves based on modest preferences generate large-scale separation, often with sharp, path-dependent transitions. Schelling also highlights the roles of vacancies, density, and boundaries in accelerating or dampening sorting, and he warns against inferring strong discriminatory motives from highly segregated outcomes: the macro pattern need not to mirror micro intentions (Schelling, 1971).

What appeals to me most is the clarity with which the paper isolates mechanism. By stripping away prices, institutions, and explicit coordination, Schelling shows that feedback from local thresholds alone can create durable, patterned segregation. That makes the model a powerful baseline: if such structure arises in an austere environment, then in richer settings we should expect at least as much sorting unless countervailing forces are present. I also appreciate the paper’s emphasis on nonlinear dynamics, especially tipping, because it aligns with empirical observations that neighborhoods often change gradually until a seemingly minor shift triggers rapid reconfiguration. (Schelling, 1971)

One question I have is about heterogeneity in tolerances and search frictions. Schelling notes that vacancies and density matter, but in cities people differ widely in moving costs, information, and tolerance thresholds. If we allow a broad distribution of tolerances and asymmetric mobility (e.g., one group faces higher search costs or fewer acceptable vacancies), do we still get the same qualitative tipping behavior, or does heterogeneity smooth the transition enough to yield stable mixed results? Put differently: how much heterogeneity is required to “de-tip” a system that would otherwise polarize?

Reference:

Schelling, T. C. (1971). Dynamic Models of Segregation. *Journal of Mathematical Sociology*, 1, 143–186.

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