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# The Affluent Society

### I. Introduction

In 1958, Harvard economist and public intellectual John Kenneth Galbraith published *The Affluent Society*. Galbraith's celebrated book examined America's new post-World War II consumer economy and political culture. While noting the unparalleled riches of American economic growth, it criticized the underlying structures of an economy dedicated only to increasing production and the consumption of goods. Galbraith argued that the U.S. economy, based on an almost hedonistic consumption of luxury products, would inevitably lead to economic inequality as private-sector interests enriched themselves at the expense of the American public. Galbraith warned that an economy where "wants are increasingly created by the process by which they are satisfied" was unsound, unsustainable, and, ultimately, immoral. "The Affluent Society," he said, was anything but.<sup>1</sup>

Little Rock schools closed rather than allow integration. This 1958 photograph shows an African American high school girl watching school lessons on television. Library of Congress.

While economists and scholars debate the merits of Galbraith's warnings and predictions, his analysis was so insightful that the title of his book has come to serve as a ready label for postwar American society. In the two decades after the end of World War II, the American economy witnessed massive and sustained growth that reshaped American culture through the abundance of consumer goods. Standards of living—across all income levels—climbed to unparalleled heights and economic inequality plummeted.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, as Galbraith noted, the Affluent Society had fundamental flaws. The new consumer economy that lifted millions of Americans into its burgeoning middle class also reproduced existing inequalities. Women struggled to claim equal rights as full participants in American society. The poor struggled to win access to good schools, good healthcare, and good jobs. The same suburbs that gave middle-class Americans new space left cities withering in spirals of poverty and crime. The Jim Crow South tenaciously defended segregation, and black Americans and other minorities suffered discrimination all across the country.

The contradictions of the Affluent Society defined the decade: unrivaled prosperity alongside persistent poverty, expanded opportunity alongside entrenched discrimination, and new liberating lifestyles alongside a stifling conformity.

## II. The Rise of the Suburbs

The seeds of a suburban nation were planted in New Deal government programs. At the height of the Great Depression, in 1932, some 250,000

Levittown in the early 1950s.  
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households lost their property to foreclosure. A year later, half of all U.S. mortgages were in default. The foreclosure rate stood at more than one thousand per day. In response, FDR's New Deal created the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC), which began purchasing and refinancing existing mortgages at risk of default. The HOLC introduced the amortized mortgage, allowing borrowers to pay back interest and principal regularly over fifteen years instead of the then standard five-year mortgage that carried large balloon payments at the end of the contract. The HOLC eventually owned nearly one of every five mortgages in America. Though homeowners paid more for their homes under this new system, home ownership was opened to the multitudes who could now gain residential stability, lower monthly mortgage payments, and accrue wealth as property values rose over time.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), another New Deal organization, increased access to home ownership by insuring mortgages and protecting lenders from financial loss in the event of a default. Lenders, however, had to agree to offer low rates and terms of up to twenty or thirty years. Even more consumers could afford homes. Though only slightly more than a third of homes had an FHA-backed mortgage by 1964, FHA loans had a ripple effect, with private lenders granting more and more home loans even to non-FHA-backed borrowers. Government programs and subsidies like the HOLC and the FHA fueled the growth of home ownership and the rise of the suburbs.

Government spending during World War II pushed the United States out of the Depression and into an economic boom that would be sustained after the war by continued government spending. Government expenditures provided loans to veterans, subsidized corporate research and development, and built the interstate highway system. In the decades after World War II, business boomed, unionization peaked, wages rose, and sustained growth buoyed a new consumer economy. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act (popularly known as the G.I. Bill), passed in 1944, offered low-interest home loans, a stipend to attend college, loans to start a business, and unemployment benefits.

The rapid growth of home ownership and the rise of suburban communities helped drive the postwar economic boom. Builders created sprawling neighborhoods of single-family homes on the outskirts of American cities. William Levitt built the first Levittown, the prototypical suburban community, in 1946 in Long Island, New York. Purchasing large acreage, subdividing lots, and contracting crews to build countless



homes at economies of scale, Levitt offered affordable suburban housing to veterans and their families. Levitt became the prophet of the new suburbs, and his model of large-scale suburban development was duplicated by developers across the country. The country's suburban share of the population rose from 19.5 percent in 1940 to 30.7 percent by 1960. Home ownership rates rose from 44 percent in 1940 to almost 62 percent in 1960. Between 1940 and 1950, suburban communities with more than ten thousand people grew 22.1 percent, and planned communities grew at an astonishing rate of 126.1 percent.<sup>4</sup> As historian Lizabeth Cohen notes, these new suburbs “mushroomed in territorial size and the populations they harbored.”<sup>5</sup> Between 1950 and 1970, America's suburban population nearly doubled to seventy-four million. Eighty-three percent of all population growth occurred in suburban places.<sup>6</sup>

The postwar construction boom fed into countless industries. As manufacturers converted from war materials back to consumer goods, and as the suburbs developed, appliance and automobile sales rose dramatically. Flush with rising wages and wartime savings, homeowners also used newly created installment plans to buy new consumer goods at once instead of saving for years to make major purchases. Credit cards, first issued in 1950, further increased access to credit. No longer stymied by the Depression or wartime restrictions, consumers bought countless washers, dryers, refrigerators, freezers, and, suddenly, televisions. The percentage of Americans that owned at least one television increased from 12 percent in 1950 to more than 87 percent in 1960. This new suburban economy also led to increased demand for automobiles. The percentage of American families owning cars increased from 54 percent in 1948 to 74 percent in 1959. Motor fuel consumption rose from some twenty-two million gallons in 1945 to around fifty-nine million gallons in 1958.<sup>7</sup>

On the surface, the postwar economic boom turned America into a land of abundance. For advantaged buyers, loans had never been easier to obtain, consumer goods had never been more accessible, and well-paying jobs had never been more abundant. “If you had a college diploma, a dark suit, and anything between the ears,” a businessman later recalled, “it was like an escalator; you just stood there and you moved up.”<sup>8</sup> But the escalator did not serve everyone. Beneath aggregate numbers, racial disparity, sexual discrimination, and economic inequality persevered, undermining many of the assumptions of an Affluent Society.

In 1939 real estate appraisers arrived in sunny Pasadena, California. Armed with elaborate questionnaires to evaluate the city's building

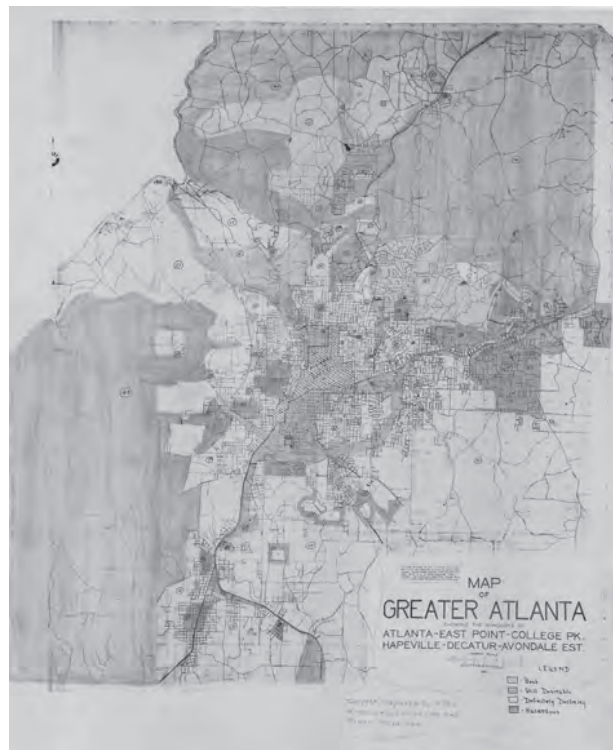


conditions, the appraisers were well versed in the policies of the HOLC. In one neighborhood, most structures were rated in “fair” repair, and appraisers noted a lack of “construction hazards or flood threats.” However, they concluded that the area “is detrimentally affected by 10 owner occupant Negro families.” While “the Negroes are said to be of the better class,” the appraisers concluded, “it seems inevitable that ownership and property values will drift to lower levels.”<sup>9</sup>

Wealth created by the booming economy filtered through social structures with built-in privileges and prejudices. Just when many middle- and working-class white American families began their journey of upward mobility by moving to the suburbs with the help of government programs such as the FHA and the G.I. Bill, many African Americans and other racial minorities found themselves systematically shut out.

A look at the relationship between federal organizations such as the HOLC, the FHA, and private banks, lenders, and real estate agents tells the story of standardized policies that produced a segregated housing market. At the core of HOLC appraisal techniques, which reflected the existing practices of private real estate agents, was the pernicious insistence that mixed-race and minority-dominated neighborhoods were

Black communities in cities such as Detroit, Chicago, Brooklyn, and Atlanta (mapped here) experienced redlining, the process by which banks and other organizations demarcated minority neighborhoods on a map with a red line. Doing so made visible the areas they believed were unfit for their services, directly denying black residents loans, but also, indirectly, housing, groceries, and other necessities of modern life. National Archives.





credit risks. In partnership with local lenders and real estate agents, the HOLC created Residential Security Maps to identify high- and low-risk lending areas. People familiar with the local real estate market filled out uniform surveys on each neighborhood. Relying on this information, the HOLC assigned every neighborhood a letter grade from A to D and a corresponding color code. The least secure, highest-risk neighborhoods for loans received a D grade and the color red. Banks limited loans in such “redlined” areas.<sup>10</sup>

Phrases like *subversive racial elements* and *racial hazards* pervade the redlined-area description files of surveyors and HOLC officials. Los Angeles’s Echo Park neighborhood, for instance, had concentrations of Japanese and African Americans and a “sprinkling of Russians and Mexicans.” The HOLC security map and survey noted that the neighborhood’s “adverse racial influences which are noticeably increasing inevitably presage lower values, rentals and a rapid decrease in residential desirability.”<sup>11</sup>

While the HOLC was a fairly short-lived New Deal agency, the influence of its security maps lived on in the FHA and Veterans Administration (VA), the latter of which dispensed G.I. Bill-backed mortgages. Both



1938 Brooklyn redlining map. National Archives.

of these government organizations, which reinforced the standards followed by private lenders, refused to back bank mortgages in “redlined” neighborhoods. On the one hand, FHA- and VA-backed loans were an enormous boon to those who qualified for them. Millions of Americans received mortgages that they otherwise would not have qualified for. But FHA-backed mortgages were not available to all. Racial minorities could not get loans for property improvements in their own neighborhoods and were denied mortgages to purchase property in other areas for fear that their presence would extend the red line into a new community. Levittown, the poster child of the new suburban America, only allowed whites to purchase homes. Thus, FHA policies and private developers increased home ownership and stability for white Americans while simultaneously creating and enforcing racial segregation.

The exclusionary structures of the postwar economy prompted protest from African Americans and other minorities who were excluded. Fair housing, equal employment, consumer access, and educational opportunity, for instance, all emerged as priorities of a brewing civil rights movement. In 1948, the U.S. Supreme Court sided with African American plaintiffs and, in *Shelley v. Kraemer*, declared racially restrictive neighborhood housing covenants—property deed restrictions barring sales to racial minorities—legally unenforceable. Discrimination and segregation continued, however, and activists would continue to push for fair housing practices.

During the 1950s and early 1960s many Americans retreated to the suburbs to enjoy the new consumer economy and search for some normalcy and security after the instability of depression and war. But many could not. It was both the limits and opportunities of housing, then, that shaped the contours of postwar American society.

### III. Education and Segregation

Older battles over racial exclusion also confronted postwar American society. One long-simmering struggle targeted segregated schooling. In 1896, the Supreme Court declared the principle of “separate but equal” constitutional. Segregated schooling, however, was rarely “equal”: in practice, black Americans, particularly in the South, received fewer funds, attended inadequate facilities, and studied with substandard materials. African Americans’ battle against educational inequality stretched across half a century before the Supreme Court again took up the merits of “separate but equal.”





School desegregation was a tense experience for all involved, but none more so than the African American students who integrated white schools. The Little Rock Nine were the first to do so in Arkansas. Their escorts, the 101st Airborne Division of the U.S. Army, protected students who took that first step in 1957. Wikimedia.

On May 17, 1954, after two years of argument, re-argument, and deliberation, Chief Justice Earl Warren announced the Supreme Court's decision on segregated schooling in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). The court found by a unanimous 9–0 vote that racial segregation violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The court's decision declared, "Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." "Separate but equal" was made unconstitutional.<sup>12</sup>

Decades of African American-led litigation, local agitation against racial inequality, and liberal Supreme Court justices made *Brown* possible. In the early 1930s, the NAACP began a concerted effort to erode the legal underpinnings of segregation in the American South. Legal, or de jure, segregation subjected racial minorities to discriminatory laws and policies. Law and custom in the South hardened antiblack restrictions. But through a series of carefully chosen and contested court cases concerning education, disfranchisement, and jury selection, NAACP lawyers such as Charles Hamilton Houston, Robert L. Clark, and future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall undermined Jim Crow's constitutional underpinnings. These attorneys initially sought to demonstrate that states





The NAACP was a key organization in the fight to end legalized racial discrimination. In this 1956 photograph, NAACP leaders, including Thurgood Marshall, who would become the first African American Supreme Court Justice, hold a poster decrying racial bias in Mississippi in 1956. Library of Congress.

systematically failed to provide African American students “equal” resources and facilities, and thus failed to live up to *Plessy*. By the late 1940s activists began to more forcefully challenge the assumptions that “separate” was constitutional at all.

Though remembered as just one lawsuit, *Brown v. Board of Education* consolidated five separate cases that had originated in the southeastern United States: *Briggs v. Elliott* (South Carolina), *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County* (Virginia), *Beulah v. Belton* (Delaware), *Boiling v. Sharpe* (Washington, D.C.), and *Brown v. Board of Education* (Kansas). Working with local activists already involved in desegregation fights, the NAACP purposely chose cases with a diverse set of local backgrounds to show that segregation was not just an issue in the Deep South, and that a sweeping judgment on the fundamental constitutionality of *Plessy* was needed.

*Briggs v. Elliott*, the first case accepted by the NAACP, illustrated the plight of segregated black schools. *Briggs* originated in rural Clarendon County, South Carolina, where taxpayers in 1950 spent \$179 to educate each white student and \$43 for each black student. The district's twelve white schools were cumulatively worth \$673,850; the value of its sixty-one black schools (mostly dilapidated, overcrowded shacks) was \$194,575.<sup>13</sup> While *Briggs* underscored the South's failure to follow *Plessy*, the *Brown* suit focused less on material disparities between black and white schools (which were significantly less than in places like Clarendon County) and more on the social and spiritual degradation that accompanied legal segregation. This case cut to the basic question of whether "separate" was itself inherently unequal. The NAACP said the two notions were incompatible. As one witness before the U.S. District Court of Kansas said, "The entire colored race is craving light, and the only way to reach the light is to start [black and white] children together in their infancy and they come up together."<sup>14</sup>

To make its case, the NAACP marshaled historical and social scientific evidence. The Court found the historical evidence inconclusive and drew their ruling more heavily from the NAACP's argument that segregation psychologically damaged black children. To make this argument, association lawyers relied on social scientific evidence, such as the famous doll experiments of Kenneth and Mamie Clark. The Clarks demonstrated that while young white girls would naturally choose to play with white dolls, young black girls would, too. The Clarks argued that black children's aesthetic and moral preference for white dolls demonstrated the pernicious effects and self-loathing produced by segregation.

Identifying and denouncing injustice, though, is different from rectifying it. Though *Brown* repudiated *Plessy*, the Court's orders did not extend to segregation in places other than public schools and, even then, to preserve a unanimous decision for such an historically important case, the justices set aside the divisive yet essential question of enforcement. Their infamously ambiguous order in 1955 (what came to be known as *Brown II*) that school districts desegregate "with all deliberate speed" was so vague and ineffectual that it left the actual business of desegregation in the hands of those who opposed it.

In most of the South, as well as the rest of the country, school integration did not occur on a wide scale until well after *Brown*. Only in the 1964 Civil Rights Act did the federal government finally implement some enforcement of the *Brown* decision by threatening to withhold funding from recalcitrant school districts, but even then southern districts found





In 1959, photographer John Bledsoe captured this image of the crowd on the steps of the Arkansas state capitol building protesting the federally mandated integration of Little Rock's Central High School. This image shows how worries about desegregation were bound up with other concerns, such as the reach of communism and government power. Library of Congress.

loopholes. Court decisions such as *Green v. New Kent County* (1968) and *Alexander v. Holmes* (1969) finally closed some of those loopholes, such as “freedom of choice” plans, to compel some measure of actual integration.

When *Brown* finally was enforced in the South, the quantitative impact was staggering. In 1968, fourteen years after *Brown*, some 80 percent of school-age black southerners remained in schools that were 90 to 100 percent nonwhite. By 1972, though, just 25 percent were in such schools, and 55 percent remained in schools with a simple nonwhite minority. By many measures, the public schools of the South became, ironically, the most integrated in the nation.<sup>15</sup>

As a landmark moment in American history, *Brown*'s significance perhaps lies less in immediate tangible changes—which were slow, partial, and inseparable from a much longer chain of events—than in the idealism it expressed and the momentum it created. The nation's highest court had attacked one of the fundamental supports of Jim Crow segregation and offered constitutional cover for the creation of one of the greatest social movements in American history.

#### IV. Civil Rights in an Affluent Society

Education was but one aspect of the nation's Jim Crow machinery. African Americans had been fighting against a variety of racist policies, cultures, and beliefs in all aspects of American life. And while the struggle for black inclusion had few victories before World War II, the war and the Double V campaign for victory against fascism abroad and racism at home, as well as the postwar economic boom led, to rising expectations for many African Americans. When persistent racism and racial segregation undercut the promise of economic and social mobility, African Americans began mobilizing on an unprecedented scale against the various discriminatory social and legal structures.

While many of the civil rights movement's most memorable and important moments, such as the sit-ins, the Freedom Rides, and especially the March on Washington, occurred in the 1960s, the 1950s were a significant decade in the sometimes tragic, sometimes triumphant march of civil rights in the United States. In 1953, years before Rosa Parks's iconic confrontation on a Montgomery city bus, an African American woman

This segregated drinking fountain was located on the grounds of the Halifax County courthouse in North Carolina. Photograph, April 1938. Wikimedia.





named Sarah Keys publicly challenged segregated public transportation. Keys, then serving in the Women's Army Corps, traveled from her army base in New Jersey back to North Carolina to visit her family. When the bus stopped in North Carolina, the driver asked her to give up her seat for a white customer. Her refusal to do so landed her in jail in 1953 and led to a landmark 1955 decision, *Sarah Keys v. Carolina Coach Company*, in which the Interstate Commerce Commission ruled that "separate but equal" violated the Interstate Commerce Clause of the U.S. Constitution. Poorly enforced, it nevertheless gave legal coverage for the Freedom Riders years later and motivated further assaults against Jim Crow.

But if some events encouraged civil rights workers with the promise of progress, others were so savage they convinced activists that they could do nothing but resist. In the summer of 1955, two white men in Mississippi kidnapped and brutally murdered fourteen-year-old Emmett Till. Till, visiting from Chicago and perhaps unfamiliar with the "etiquette" of Jim Crow, allegedly whistled at a white woman named Carolyn Bryant. Her husband, Roy Bryant, and another man, J. W. Milam, abducted Till from his relatives' home, beat him, mutilated him, shot him, and threw his body in the Tallahatchie River. Emmett's mother held an open-casket funeral so that Till's disfigured body could make national news. The men were brought to trial. The evidence was damning, but an all-white jury found the two not guilty. Mere months after the decision, the two boasted of their crime, in all of its brutal detail, in *Look* magazine. "They ain't gonna go to school with my kids," Milam said. They wanted "to make an example of [Till]—just so everybody can know how me and my folks stand."<sup>16</sup> The Till case became an indelible memory for the young black men and women soon to propel the civil rights movement forward.

On December 1, 1955, four months after Till's death and six days after the *Keys v. Carolina Coach Company* decision, Rosa Parks refused to surrender her seat on a Montgomery city bus and was arrested. Montgomery's public transportation system had longstanding rules requiring African American passengers to sit in the back of the bus and to give up their seats to white passengers if the buses filled. Parks was not the first to protest the policy by staying seated, but she was the first around whom Montgomery activists rallied.

Montgomery's black population, under the leadership of local ministers and civil rights workers, formed the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) and coordinated an organized boycott of the city's