

# Race, Class and Space: Physical and Social Planning in the Three Regional Plans for New York

TONY SCHUMAN

New Jersey Institute of Technology

ELLIOTT SCLAR

Columbia University

## REGION AND RACE: AN INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the relationship of physical and social planning through an analysis of the three regional plans for New York put forward by the Committee on the Plan of New York and Its Environs, established in 1921, and its successor, the Regional Plan Association (RPA): the 1929 Regional Plan for New York (RPNY), the Second Regional Plan (1968) and the Third Regional Plan (1995), presently in draft form.

There are several compelling reasons why this is a critical juncture at which to focus on issues of race and class in the tri-state metropolitan region. The physical isolation of African-Americans in compacted inner city ghettos has reached such proportions that serious scholars now invoke the specter of apartheid to describe the situation (Massey & Denton, 1993; Bullard, Grigsby III & Lee, 1994; Rusk, 1994). The two largest cities in the region, New York and Newark, are among the most segregated in the United States; both cities score highly on every index used to measure racial isolation and concentration (Massey & Denton, 1993, 222). Moreover, both cities have shown an increase in these indices from 1970 to 1990, indicating that racial segregation is now firmly built into the physical and social fabric of the region.

As this racial concentration has consolidated, structural shifts in technology and the global economy have decimated the local job market. This is most notable in the loss of 140,000 production and craft jobs in the region that provided good paying jobs to unskilled or semi-skilled workers. Concomitant with this shift in the economic base has been a dramatic redistribution of income to the point where the United States now has the highest gap between rich and poor of any industrialized nation, an imbalance that is particularly severe in the tri-state region. (Bradshur, 1995) There are at present more than two million poor people in the region (RPA, 1995, 28). Many of them reside in the area's central cities. As Massey and Denton have persuasively argued, this interaction of poverty and segregation is responsible for the creation and perpetuation of a black underclass. The contemporary black ghetto is a place of consistently high unemployment, low median income, low median house values, low

school test scores, a high percentage of single parent families and births to unwed mothers and a high incidence of substance abuse and crime. The result is an environment where these effects not only occur, but are common or normative.

## THE (FIRST) REGIONAL PLAN OF NEW YORK AND ITS ENVIRONS (1929)

From the moment in the closing decades of the nineteenth century when transit severed the ancient tie between residence and work place, there has been a strong impulse to channel the spatial transformation of walking cities into coherent metropolitan regions. Although the roots of conscious regionalism antedate the RPA, it is America's oldest formal regional planning organization. It owes an evident intellectual debt to earlier attempts at regional rationality found in the English Garden Cities Movement and the Plan for Chicago.

At about the same time that regionalism was becoming a clearly articulated focus within the nascent planning profession, the mechanization of agriculture was transforming large numbers of rural African-Americans into urban immigrants. In the opening decades of the present century this population of former slaves and their descendants began leaving the southeast for the great cities of the northeast and midwest. By 1930, when the RPNY was released, the African-American population had grown to 327,000, roughly 5 percent of the city population.

The growing impact of the African-American presence in New York was noted by the writers of *New York Panorama* published in 1938 as a companion to the WPA Guide to *New York City*. The authors, members of the Federal Writers Project, bracket a concise summary of the migration with the following curious passages:

Though always restricted by tradition to certain residential areas, trades and professions, the Negro has lived and labored in New York for more than three hundred years. He is one of the most vivid figures in

the city's history; and in terms of progress and chronology, his continuous adjustment to New York's ever-changing environment, the manner in which he has reacted to the handicaps and penalties imposed upon him because of class and color, make a record of dramatic interest and social challenge. (Works Progress Administration, 1938, 132)

The question of what will ultimately happen to the Negro in New York is bound up with the question of what will happen to the Negro in America. It has been said that the Negro embodies the "romance of American life"; if that is true, the romance is one whose glamour is overlaid with shadows of tragic premonition. (Works Progress Administration, 1938, 151)

A strong theme in both the *Guide* and *Panorama* is the success of America as an urban melting pot. The implicit tale is one of assimilation and triumph over humble origins. As the quote reveals, however, the African-American experience did not fit the mold, and the authors are hard pressed to come to terms with New York's ever more complex racial geography. Despite the obvious attempt at enlightened understanding, these progressive authors lapse unconsciously into a language of stereotypes. This is noticeable in the depiction of an entire group as a singular character; "the Negro," a "vivid figure," who is transformed into a subject of literary myth and mystery: the Negro embodies "romance," "glamour," and is shadowed by "tragic premonition."

Although the 1920s language of the RPNY is more prosaic than the 1930s language of the WPA, it too gingerly skirts the issue of race.

Since the War, there has been a heavy influx of colored people from the South. The Negro quarters of Harlem have been filling up and pushing out their boundaries...Once more a new racial element, which lacks experience of city life, which has not achieved a healthful adjustment to the New York environment, and which concentrates itself as does every alien quantity that is poured into a non-assimilating medium, is being explo-

ited by forces with which it is still too weak and too ignorant to cope. New slum districts are consequently beginning to appear. (Adams, Lewis and McCrosky, 1929, 58)

While this passage seems to imply that the "racial element" will gain sufficient strength and knowledge to cope with urban life, elsewhere the document suggests that this weakness is not a temporary failing but a characterological deficiency of Negroes and foreign immigrants alike. Citing conservative housing reformers DeForest and Veiller, the RPNY planners worry that recent immigrants would not become good citizens.

[T]he immigrants who stopped in the city seem continually to have overtaxed its housing facilities. Many

of them were able-bodied; but as there were no test of fitness and no restrictions, there was 'a considerable portion of out-and-out paupers, who almost to a man-and woman-stayed in the city to become a burden upon charity.' (quote from DeForest and Veiller (1908), in Adams, Lewis and McCrosky, 1929, 57.)

While the tone of the document is carefully measured, there is clearly prejudice towards certain segments of the population. Some evidence that strong nativist feeling existed within the RPNY staff was uncovered by Meyers (1995). An archival memo from Wayne Heydecker, an RPNY staff member who worked closely with Adams, reveals the depth of this feeling. According to Heydecker, Negroes and Jews "lack the knowledge of how to live according to American standards." As a result, decent natives "are gradually being forced out [of nice residential districts], because we cannot permit our children to grow up with such profane foul mouthed companions." Heydecker proposes "natural and self-imposed segregation on a large scale." (Meyers, 1995, 20 fn.)

The framers of the RPNY were concerned that the foreign and Negro population, in addition to constituting a non-productive burden in their own right, would interfere with the efficiency of the residential and commercial real estate market. Chief economist Robert Haig expresses this concern succinctly in his study "Major Economic Factors in Metropolitan Growth and Arrangement," Vol. I of the Regional Survey that underpins the first Regional Plan:

Some of the poorest people live in conveniently located slums on high-priced land. On patrician Fifth Avenue, Tiffany and Woolworth, cheek by jowl, offer jewels and gimcracks...on substantially identical sites ... In the very heart of the 'commercial' city on Manhattan Island south of 59th Street, the inspectors in 1922 found nearly 420,000 workers, employed in the factories. Such a situation outrages one's sense of order. Everything seems misplaced. One yearns to rearrange the hodge-podge and to put things where they belong. (Haig, 1927, 32)

The "sense of order" that Haig and his colleagues sought to promote reflects class prejudice as well as the desire for economic efficiency. The physical plan itself is a series of proposals of breathtaking scope to re-order the region through the construction of an elaborate network of bridges, tunnels, highways and parks. While the intention of the plan was primarily to ease congestion and improve productivity, as implemented by New York City construction czar Robert Moses it had a devastating long term impact on the social stratification of the metropolitan region. This is especially poignant in light of the authors' express denial of such an intention.

What we have to refrain from are those details of housing or sanitation or social order that have no direct relation to the development of the land, the **transport-**

tation system, or the general scheme of city building. What we have to pursue as our primary task is the **making** of a comprehensive ground diagram. (RPNY, 1929, 134)

Some have argued that this denial of social intention is disingenuous. Robert Fitch, for example, in *The Assassination of New York* (1993), sees in the first regional plan nothing less than a deliberate campaign to eviscerate New York of its industrial base and to free waterfront and central city land for more lucrative redevelopment as high class residential and commercial districts. While contemporary developments such as Battery Park City, Riverside South and Queens West lend weight to Fitch's hypothesis, it is not so obvious that the authors of the plan shared this long term vision. What does appear certain is that their conception of a "comprehensive ground diagram" was based upon the principles of separate use zoning and a narrow economic definition of the highest and best use of urban land. Their approach to economic development was more concerned with regional competitiveness and profitability than with human development and job security.

### THE SECOND REGIONAL PLAN (1968)

By the time the second plan was promulgated, the question of race was unavoidable. Deteriorating conditions led to urban riots and the appointment of a Presidential Commission on Urban Unrest -- the Kemer Commission -- whose final report warned that the United States was rapidly becoming two nations, black and white, separate and unequal. In this context, of the eight reasons the RPA gave as warranting a second regional plan, number two on the list (after "Uncontrolled Urbanization") was:

A segregated society: the growing separation of rich and poor, Negro and white. The movement continues of white, middle- and upper-income families from the older cities to the suburbs. (The Second Regional Plan, 1968, 8)

Despite the prominence that race is given in the plan, however, instances of overt discrimination such as willful housing segregation are never discussed. Instead the issue is handled mainly as a matter of economics. The absence of African-Americans and Puerto Ricans in the spreading suburbs is seen as a problem of insufficient affordable housing.

[A]lmost no new housing is being built for families with incomes of under \$10,000 a year, except government subsidized housing, which is mostly in the old cities. So these families remain crowded into obsolete housing in the older cities. By far the majority of Negro and Puerto Rican families are among these families, and their segregation from the rest of the Region is growing. (The Second Regional Plan, 1968, 11)

In terms of employment the report calls for the perennial solution -- more job training and, however quaint it may

appear in our *laissez faire* age, guaranteed public employment. However given the general market-oriented ideology of the business leadership that guides the RPA, the call was somewhat oblique.

[A]dditional low skilled jobs must be available as long as there are unskilled persons seeking jobs. There are hundreds of unskilled jobs which would make the Region a better place to live--just look around our cities and compare them to European cities that Americans flock to **admire** every summer. It would be doubly productive to employ people to build a better environment than to leave them unemployed. (The Second Regional Plan, 1968, 16)

On the issue of metropolitan fiscal resources the second plan was remarkably prescient. It called for a federal take-over of welfare as the necessary condition for allowing cities to cope with the pressures of the urban in-migration of poor people.

[Cities] will never be pleasant places to live compared to the newer areas until the cost of poverty-related public services is lifted from them. Nor will the poor ever have the quality of education and other public services needed to raise themselves from poverty as long as the cities must contribute a large share of the costs. (The Second Regional Plan, 1968, 11-14)

As with the first plan, the second regional plan places its heaviest emphasis and greatest specificity on those matters which lead to a more efficient and compact region. The principal difference is that the role assigned to the center has shifted. The second plan reverses the doctrine of decentralization and projects Manhattan as a national center of commerce and finance. To a large extent it forms the basis for the Master Plan published in 1969 by the City of New York. One of the key innovations of that plan was the introduction of special district zoning to attract and retain an elite work force in a new national center. Thus the first special district, at Lincoln Square, had two goals: to reinforce New York's hegemony as a cultural capital and to provide a southern anchor for the revitalization of the Upper West Side. (Sclar, in press)

Concurrent with this courtship of an elite workforce, the second regional plan reflects the social turmoil of the times in its recognition of issues of race and poverty. Written in period of economic expansion, however the plan permits itself the luxury of assuming that education and training will rapidly open the doors to universal economic prosperity:

Faced with daily tensions of urban areas related to poverty and race, The Second Regional Plan is shaped to help resolve them. But recognizing, also, the steep climb in income that this economy could provide for everyone if recent economic trends can be continued and the prosperity widely distributed, the Plan also concentrates on arranging the economic activities of

the Region to best allow people to enjoy their new wealth and leisure and use them to genuinely enrich their lives. In seeking the best arrangement of what is built for the New York Metropolitan Region, the plan paradoxically addresses both the needs of poverty and the potential of wealth. (RPA, 1968, 7)

The history of the past thirty years demonstrates how much this cavalier economic projection was off the mark. In similar fashion, the plan invoked the contemporary political climate, notably the rise of the black power movement, to justify not taking a strong stand on residential segregation.

In many ghetto areas, a suggestion to move out is not popular right now. Many living there feel that whites are just trying to get hold of valuable parts of the City for themselves or break up the growing black political power in the City. However, it does seem likely, that good housing outside the ghetto would be welcome by many Negroes and Puerto Ricans, as long as it were convenient to jobs and services and good schooling.

This effort to improve housing quality and promote integration would fail in large part if housing that should be replaced is filled with new unskilled unemployed in-migrants as soon as it is vacated, as has been happening in the Region's core. (RPA, 1968, 63).

This section is notable both for its frank description of the dynamics of ghetto housing and the affirmation, in passing, that integration is a goal.

### THE DRAFT THIRD REGIONAL PLAN (1995)

In its emphasis on the regional transportation network the draft third regional plan follows the general thrust of the earlier plans. It calls for expanding rail freight and for filling in missing links in existing commuter rail lines to create a regional rail system, including access to La Guardia and Kennedy airports. But the third plan, entitled "A Region At Risk," is very different in tone from the previous documents in its expression of alarm over both wasteful land consumption and a decline in the economic competitiveness of the region. It is the latter aspect that bears most directly on workforce issues. Between 1989 and 1992, the region lost 770,000 jobs, the largest job loss in any metropolitan area in the country since World War II (RPA, 1995, 4). At the same time, the composition of the region's work force has changed: nearly half of those working or seeking work are women, and over a third (36%) are Hispanic, Asian, or African-American. Over the past decade, white male workers have decreased in absolute numbers. In New York City, 59% of the work force is comprised of racial or ethnic minorities (RPA, 1995, 25). Moreover, the future work force will, in all likelihood, continue this trend because all population growth in the region is accounted for by foreign immigration, principally from the Dominican Republic, China, and the newly independent states of the former Socialist bloc.

The result of these demographic changes is that the third plan reverses the RPA's historic perspective on minority and immigrant labor: instead of being maligned as a nonproductive burden on the overtaxed resources of the region, this group is seen as a critical component in the region's return to economic vitality. As a consequence, the plan is focused on measures to bring the immigrant work force into the cultural and economic main stream, primarily through education programs. The RPA cites evidence linking education levels to a rise in income and, notably, productivity:

[A] recent study by the National Center on the Educational Quality of the Workforce indicates that a 10% increase in the education level of a company's workforce improves its productivity by nearly 9%, a larger increase than that caused by comparable increases in hours worked or investments in computers, machinery or other equipment (RPA, 1995, 101).

In other words, the ethnic and racial minority work force is now cast as human capital. In a region forecast to be a majority minority society by 2010, the education of this labor force is a matter of paramount concern. The difference in skill levels is identified as the most significant cause of the increasing polarization of the economy into high- and low-income segments. The draft plan emphasizes the dramatic decline over the past decade in wage levels of high school versus college graduates: in 1989, a 30-year old high school graduate made only 68% of the income of a college graduate, compared with 88% in 1979. Consequently the plan's recommendations seek to improve the skill level of the immigrant and minority workforce by bolstering English language programs, currently over subscribed in the region, and calling for state assumption of local school budgets. While these measures reflect a new generosity towards the minority workforce, there is also evidence that the RPA is making a virtue of necessity. The plan also calls for reform of immigration policy to better match the supply of incoming skills to the demands of the local labor market.

Thus the third Regional Plan represents a major step forward in focusing on labor force participation as a critical component in regional prosperity. It elevates "equity" along with "economy" and "environment" as one of three foundation stones for improving quality of life in the region. But if the plan is forthright in acknowledging that the region is "shamed by its persistent racial and income segregation," it soft peddles many of the formidable obstacles to transforming the region's social and economic imbalance. While a concern is expressed for bringing low-income communities into the economic main stream, no concerted campaign is articulated for breaking up the ghettos. In fact, the word "ghetto" does not appear in the document. Rather, "racially-segregated inner cities" are identified along with older working-class neighborhoods and immigrant ethnic "enclaves" as areas physically isolated from suburban job markets. The emphasis is on the relation to employment, not on the differences in levels and causes of isolation that

distinguish these three forms of residential concentration. While the issue of segregation is identified, including the desire of the white middle class to keep "them" out (RPA, 1995, 8), the plan offers no targeted response to this issue.

A case in point is the discussion of "housing" incorporated into the "Governance" initiative, which, as in the second plan, speaks more to issues of affordability than to racial integration. For this it relies on voluntary efforts and moral exhortations: "Communities *should* welcome and include all races, ethnic groups, income groups and age groups." (RPA, 1995, 149; emphasis added). The review of New Jersey's experience with the Mt. Laurel court decisions is instructive here. The Mt. Laurel cases, resulting from a lawsuit brought by the NAACP against exclusionary zoning in the New Jersey Township of Mt. Laurel to open up the suburbs to lower income inner-city residents, resulted in a court-ordered mandate for all New Jersey municipalities to provide their fair share of low- and moderate-income housing. The Council on Affordable Housing (COAH), established by the New Jersey legislature to oversee compliance with the decisions, created a mechanism called the Regional Contribution Agreement which permits municipalities to buy their way out of up to half their obligation by making a financial contribution to another municipality within the same housing region. The result of this experience is that while New Jersey has added thousands of new units of affordable housing under the Mt. Laurel program, it has had little impact on inner city movement to the suburbs.

During a series of Roundtable discussions preceding the draft plan, the Mt. Laurel experience was discussed in some depth at a session on "The Habitable Region." (RPA, 1992). When this discussion found its way into the draft Third Regional Plan, however, its thrust had shifted. Instead of identifying the absence of black migration to the suburbs as a shortcoming of the Mt. Laurel plan as implemented by COAH, the draft plan tries to reassure its readers who fear that "affordable housing" will bring unwanted "outsiders" into their communities: "The fears are misplaced, because the 'outsiders' are the community's own grown children, teachers, firefighters, and police officers who want to stay in the town where they grew up or now work but cannot afford to." (RPA, 1995, 150)

### THE RPA'S DILEMMA

The timidity of the RPA's discussion of suburban segregation is emblematic of the internal contradiction at the heart of that organization. More importantly it is emblematic as well of the political difficulty we as a society have in effectively addressing our urban problems. On the one hand, the RPA is at the forefront of efforts to promote coherent regional development that conserves natural resources as it nourishes human ones. On the other, the corporate sponsorship, that helps to make it an effective planning organization, also limits the scope of practical initiatives which it can put forth. Typically where longer term social issues clash with

more immediate political imperatives, the social issues are given second priority.

Thus "the sweeping vision" heralded in the first plan or the "radical restructuring of the status quo" promised in the second are compromised from the start. It was precisely this tension that was at the heart of the famous Adams/Mumford debate in the early 1930s. Writing in *The New Republic*, Lewis Mumford argued that there was no "regionalism" in the plan, that it merely confirmed chaotic methods governing regional growth and proposed no serious attempt at regionalizing the organization of production. "The Regional Plan for New York and Its Environs, Mumford charged, "was conceived ... in terms which would meet the interests and prejudices of the existing financial rulers ... and its aim from the beginning was as much welfare and amenity as could be obtained without altering any of the political or business institutions which have made the city precisely what it is." (Mumford, 1932, 152) Thomas Adams, author of the plan, responded angrily by accusing Mumford of being an ineffectual idealist, an "esthete-sociologist," and defended the plan as a practical and workable set of proposals. As a later commentator observed, Adams was "so concerned not to interfere in any way with existing rights and institutions that he rejected even the possibility of public intervention in low-cost housing." (Tafari, 1980, 435)

This pragmatism pervades the Third Plan as well. While the plan's section on "Equity" recognizes that "governance is critical to breaking down remaining segregationist barriers" (RPA, 1995, 35), the section on governance offers no specific proposals to address segregation directly. Except for a proposal for state assumption of school financing, the RPA relies again on voluntary cooperation among the over 2,000 separate administrative entities in the region. Here the authors acknowledge that problems besetting the educational system go far beyond formulas of per capita expenditure per student, but the proposed remedy does not address underlying inequities of neighborhood conditions, concentrated poverty and the like. The principle of "home rule" is held sacrosanct despite a very clear understanding of the costs of this system:

The net result of this property tax-based and highly fragmented system is a region in which the cost of living is among the highest in the nation and the quality of life it offers its citizens is declining. Unsustainable growth and development patterns are established; the future workforce is inadequately educated and unprepared. Low-density automobile dependent sprawl is encouraged; centers of all sizes are emptied of residents, jobs, and retail establishments; and open space and sensitive natural resources are consumed." (RPA, 1995, 138)

Citing widespread popular skepticism about big government, the authors are wary about proposing new layers of municipal or regional government. Instead they argue cautiously that the home rule-based governance system should

be improved rather than dismantled. Their presentation misses the fire of former New Jersey Governor Jim Florio's keynote address at the RPA's 1991 Regional Assembly, where he spoke candidly about the need for government initiatives and tax increases to provide necessary services and infrastructure improvements. Florio paid a high political price for his willingness to move ahead of current political wisdom. In his farewell "State of the State" address, Florio warned, "It's time to stop living in a fantasy where we think small is automatically better when in fact the price we pay is the duplication and inefficiency of maintaining 611 school districts and 567 totally independent municipalities awash in administrative redundancies. The bottom line cries out for more cooperation, coordination, and, yes, regionalization." (Gray, 1994)

### CONCLUSIONS: THE REGIONALIZATION OF RACIAL CONFLICT

When the first regional plan was gestating, in the late teens and early twenties, the orbit of racial conflict was within five miles of the central business district (CBD). Harlem was the flash point of urban racial change as speculators recouped their losses by converting a white community into a black one. By the time of the second plan, in the early 1960s, the racial front lines had moved further out from the CBD. The emblematic fight in Forest Hills, a middle income neighborhood in Queens, was triggered by a decision to locate a large public housing project at the edge of the neighborhood. The City was ultimately forced to back away from its original plan. Instead of a larger number of low income housing units, it substituted a drastically scaled back plan replacing most of the family apartments with units for the elderly (Cuomo, 1974). The site of the most recent racial clash, unfolding as the third regional plan is being readied for release, is Leonia New Jersey, a predominately white middle class, inner ring suburb just across the George Washington Bridge, about 15 miles from the CBD. The ostensible fight is over the regionalization of suburban schools to promote racial integration. Leonia sits adjacent to Englewood, a racially integrated suburb with a heavily black public school population. The fight is over a court ordered regionalization of suburban schools to promote racial integration. (Sullivan, 1995)

In none of these cases did or will the outcome bring a satisfactory resolution. By the 1930s Harlem was an overcrowded ghetto with a large concentration of very poor people. Forest Hills, which was a prestigious urban neighborhood until the 1970s, is no longer a preferred social destination, serving at best as a stopping point on the way out of the city for those with upwardly mobile ambitions. The pressures on Leonia are similar to the ones which are felt in Yonkers and Mount Vernon in Westchester County. They will only push more middle class people further into the hinterlands. These three examples are important because they demonstrate that the unsolved regional problems related to race do not go away as a result of infrastructure

improvement. Instead they make the next round of planning more difficult.

Indeed if Massey and Denton (1993) are correct, the regional crisis will only get worse as the effects of racial segregation are compounded by fading economic opportunity. By not targeting the dismantling of the ghetto as a priority concern, the RPA is not only missing an opportunity to link social and physical planning in a comprehensive way, but is making a potentially tragic error. Either we make a concerted effort to open up the region or we can stand by and watch as the white middle class withdraws into ever more remote and gated reserves and devotes an ever higher proportion of both private and public wealth to personal protection. The state of California already spends more of its resources on prison construction and maintenance than it does on education. It is hard to imagine how such *choice* can ever be a recipe for a healthy and prosperous democratic society.

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