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Modern and post-modern cities and ethnic residential segregation: Is Los Angeles different?

Ron Johnston [a,*], Michael Poulsen [b], James Forrest [b]

[a] School of Geographical Sciences, University of Bristol, Bristol BS8 1SS, UK
[b] Department of Human Geography, Macquarie University, Sydney 2109, NSW, Australia

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Abstract

Dear and others associated with the 'Los Angeles School of Urbanism' have presented a series of challenging ideas regarding changes in urban form as a consequence of the shift from modernism to post-modernism. Some of those challenges relate to a city's ethnic diversity and residential segregation, with Los Angeles presented as a paradigm exemplar of an emerging new urban form. This paper evaluates the arguments that Los Angeles in particular, and Californian metropolitan areas more generally, differ from metropolitan areas elsewhere in the United States in the nature of ethnic residential segregation there. Regression analyses provide little support for the argument, but graphical analyses show that although Los Angeles does not differ from the general, US-wide trends, its almost unique nature in terms of its ethnic diversity means that it clearly stands out as a place with a different pattern shared by very few others.

Keywords: Urbanism; Post-modernism; Ethnic residential segregation; Los Angeles

1. Introduction

In a series of publications over the last decade, Michael Dear and a number of colleagues have introduced the concept of post-modern urbanism, in which 'multiple urban (ir)rationalities are competing to fill the void' left by the evaporation of 'the traditional logics of earlier urbanisms' (Dear and Flusty, 1998, p. 50). They claim that they 'have glimpsed a new way of understanding cities' (p. 68) and set out a research agenda involving a 'proper accounting of contemporary pattern and process [which] will require a much more strenuous effort directed toward comparative urban analysis' (p. 67). This paper reports on one such effort, responding—as did Clark (2000)—to the research challenge set by Dear and Flusty, in the process translating an urban model that was qualitative, suggestive, even impressionistic in its nature into quantitative terms, thereby allowing a rigorous exploration of its contents.

One of the key elements separating post-modern from modern cities in Dear and Flusty's argument is their diversity, including their ethnic diversity. A consequence of this—generated by 'flexist-induced immigration' (p. 62)—is what they term 'memetic contagion' stimulated by inter-cultural contact. 'Landscapes and peoples are homogenized' (p. 65), yet still acutely fragmented and specialized (p. 66), generating a new urban form.

Los Angeles is presented as the paradigm exemplar of this new urban form: it 'is undoubtedly a special place' (p. 52), and possibly 'a harbinger of the future', although elsewhere Dear (2002, p. 28; his emphasis) presents Los Angeles 'not as *the* model of contemporary urbanism ... but as one of a number of space-time prisms through which current processes of urban (re)formation may be advantageously viewed'. Work on Los Angeles has been

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: r.johnston@bristol.ac.uk (R. Johnston).

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the focus of what Dear (2003; Dear and Flusty, 2001) has called the Los Angeles School of Urbanism. Its work contrasts Los Angeles, as the prototypical post-modern city, with Chicago, the pre-eminent modernist metropolis: Los Angeles (or Southern California more generally) 'is an unusual amalgam—a polycentric, polyglot, polycultural pastiche that is deeply involved in rewriting American urbanism' (Dear, 2002, p. 6).

One of the defining characteristics of Los Angeles according to these arguments is its ethnic diversity. Dear quotes Jencks (1993, p. 7) on this issue:

> Los Angeles, like all cities, is unique, but in one way it may typify the world city of the future: there are only minorities. No single ethnic group, nor way of life, nor industrial sector dominates the scene. Pluralism has gone further here than in any other city in the world and for this reason it may well characterize the global megalopolis of the future.

Little is said of how this pluralism—and the associated 'memetic contagion'—is reflected in the city's geography, however. The contrasts drawn with Chicago stress the replacement of an urban fabric comprising zones and sectors dominated by a single nuclear core with a 'revised theory, the urban peripheries are organizing what remains of the center' (Dear, 2003, p. 503). How this is represented on the ground is uncertain, however: does the segregation of ethnic groups, so central to the Chicago School model, still hold, or is there a new social geography in post-modern cities? Again, Dear (2003, p. 18) relies on Jencks' (1993, p. 32) description of Los Angeles as 'a combination of enclaves with high identity and multienclaves with mixed identity, and, taken as a whole, it is perhaps the most heterogeneous city in the world'.

The inference we draw from Dear and Jencks on the issue of ethnic diversity is that the extremes of ethnic residential segregation that characterized the 'modern' cities such as Chicago are not present in Los Angeles. There are certainly some ethnic enclaves—the term ghetto is not used by them—but, it seems, a great deal of mixture (as graphically demonstrated by Allen and Turner, 1997, 2002, and discussed in Waldinger and Bozorgmehr, 1996, and others[1]). Is that the case? Does Los Angeles—as the exemplar of a new cultural form—differ from metropolitan areas elsewhere in the United States in the degree of residential segregation of the main ethnic groups? Other research (e.g. Iceland et al., 2002; Frey and Farley, 1996) has suggested variations across the country which might reflect such differences, but there have been relatively few rigorous tests of such observed patterns (Iceland, 2004; Johnston et al., 2004; Logan et al., 2004; Wilkes and Iceland, 2004), especially using pre-2000 census data. Building on earlier work (Johnston et al., 2002, 2003, 2004), in this paper we address the issue of whether Los Angeles in particular, and western US metropolitan areas in general, differ significantly from other US metropolitan areas in their levels of ethnic residential segregation.

2. The geography of ethnic residential segregation

To test whether Californian urban areas, and Los Angeles in particular, currently differ from those in the rest of the United States with regard to levels of ethnic residential segregation, we report here on analyses of data taken from the 2000 US Census.[2] Our approach to the measurement of residential segregation uses a methodology deployed previously (Poulsen et al., 2001; Johnston et al., 2003) which classifies areas—in this case, census blocks, the smallest areal units for which data are available, and thus providing a fine-grained framework for exploring patterns of residential separation—according to their ethnic composition.[3] The classification schema, illustrated in Fig. 1, categorizes each census block according to three variables: the percentage of the population who are white; the percentage who are members of non-white minorities; and the percentage of the non-white minorities who are from a single ethnic group. We use the six (self-defined) ethnic groups identified in the 2000 census Summary Form 3 returns, although all of our analyses focus on the four groups that predominate in the country's metropolitan areas—whites, African-Americans, Hispanics, and Asians.[4]

Six type areas are identified in the classification schema shown in Fig. 1. Areas with a white majority

[1] There is a large literature on various aspects of ethnicity in Los Angeles, but none which sets it in the comparative context deployed here.

[2] As with virtually all analyses of residential segregation based on census or comparable data, this necessarily focuses on 'night-time' patterns only—i.e. the patterns according to people's usual residence. At different times of the day, the situation may be very different: Beverly Hills in Los Angeles, for example, is predominantly white according to the census, but during the day it has many Hispanic and Asian 'residents' (or 'sojourners') working in various forms of domestic and personal service.

[3] Most studies of residential segregation in US metropolitan areas have used census tracts, with populations averaging over 4000 persons. Although these are entirely suitable where there are large ethnic minority populations living in major concentrations, it may well be that with smaller groups the tracts contain considerable internal heterogeneity in which local concentrations are submerged (as suggested in Wong, 2003). Hence our use of census blocks, with average populations of 500 across all metropolitan areas according to the 2000 Census.

[4] As in all such studies, the categories deployed are social constructions (on which see Robbin, 1999, 2000a,b); some are also internally heterogeneous—notably the Asians and Hispanics, each of which comprises individuals from a wide range of backgrounds.