
Thomas Maloutas and Kuniko Fujita (eds.) (2012)

Residential Segregation in Comparative Perspective: Making Sense of Contextual Diversity

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The book edited by Maloutas and Fujita represents a collection of texts on urban segregation in metropolitan areas in three different continents and eleven different cities (six in Europe, four in Asia, and São Paulo in South America). The volume is structured upon a simple, but inspiring idea: segregation in urban settlements is highly influenced by contextual effects. These effects range from particular institutional trajectories and legacies to economic profiles and also to cultural settings that foster or reduce the probability of spatial segregation of social groups inside big cities.

Another strong argument, observed by the reading of the entire volume, is that there is no theoretically general and causal pattern capable of explaining segregation. This phenomenon is characterized by a multidimensionality that makes some aspects of social life more salient to explain segregation than others. The Chicago School paradigm (valid for most of the U.S. metropolises) of “segregated and unequal” can be observed solely in some of the cases, such as Beijing, Istanbul and São Paulo, but not in the remaining ones.

On the contrary, the articles reveal that inequality is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition to promote urban segregation. The articles emphasize configurations that include segregated cities with low levels of inequality (Copenhagen), unequal settlements without segregation (such as the case of Madrid, Athens or Hong Kong) and cases where low levels of inequality are combined with almost no segregation (Taipei and Tokyo).

The explanations are univocal in assigning particular causes related to history, political decisions in terms of public policy, previous levels of inequality and social stratification, as well as institutional legacies. As a whole, these factors combined are, as the editors designate, “contextual” causes influencing segregation in each country.

Most of the authors recognize that public housing policies, universalistic welfare states, and low levels of inequality tend to avoid or reduce the levels of segregation in metropolitan areas. The role of the state in this respect is undeniable and goes beyond social policy, including interventions in economic development and labor market

initiatives. These initiatives are responsible for reducing the pay-offs (or incentives) for social segregation in cities, observed more clearly when state policy is absent or residual.

In methodological terms, the work is characterized by an astonishing uniformity in terms of measures employed, combined with different analytical methods. Firstly, most of the texts make use of the Dissimilarity Index (DI) to represent the degree of spatial segregation of urban residents. Secondly, almost all use some combination of income, education, immigration, and occupation as base for mapping segregation. Finally, the wide range of methods – from frequency tables to multivariate regression analysis – enables the use of different approaches to the same problem. In addition to this, some of the authors are some of the most recognized experts on the subject (such as in the contributions on Beijing, Paris, and São Paulo).

Despite the undeniable value of the volume, it has some significant limitations that cannot be overlooked. The first is that the term “comparative”, included in the title, is not at all applicable to the chapters it contains. Every single essay is a case study, with the conclusion being the only attempt to systematize and compare the results using the previous texts as an empirical source. In this sense, there is no real comparison beyond the reader’s interpretation. A comparative analysis, properly speaking, would require more refined controls and appropriate techniques to evaluate each case in relation to the others.

The second major limitation of the volume, on the whole, can be observed in the selection of cases. The book excludes most of the Americas (especially works on the U.S. since they are particularly criticized in the book), and the entire regions of Africa and Oceania. There is a particular focus on two regions: Europe, with six metropolises (Athens, Budapest, Copenhagen, Istanbul, Madrid, and Paris), and East Asia, with four cases (Beijing, Hong Kong, Taipei, and Tokyo). Nonetheless, although the book just covers São Paulo, the Latin American audience would be most benefited by the experience observed in cities belonging to other developing countries.

Despite the severe critique of the uncritical adoption of general and US-generated theories on urban segregation, all texts seem to be too attached to the same American theories they criticize since they limit their analyses to big cities (generally capitals or economic hubs), and employ the categories of occupation, income, and ethnicity to assess segregation.

The work would have benefited from the inclusion of some particularly interesting cases that do not conform to this pattern or seem to explain urban segregation by really different contexts such as religion, international conflict, or border and immigration issues. Some clear examples could be obtained in Jerusalem, the Tijuana – San Diego or Ciudad Juarez – El Paso dyads, among other potentially interesting cases.

Aside from these cases, there is no analytical thinking on the role of scale and scalar change in the results. Some authors use different scales interchangeably without accounting for the potential aggregate problems resulting from scalar change itself. Others try to use loosely-related information (usually census tracts) also without any analytical guidance on what kind of spatial units would be most appropriate to measure and analyze segregation.

In this sense, while some causes (in particular inequality) were severely questioned as factors responsible for generating spatial clustering of groups, the scale at which the empirical evidence is organized and assessed received no attention at all. Despite the existence of a large amount of literature on geography concerning the Modifiable Areal Unit Problem (MAUP) and other aggregation problems, none of the chapters gave more in-depth consideration of how changing from one scale to another would affect the results. Additionally, there was no discussion at all on the theoretical consequences of scalar change on segregation studies.

This leads to several questions, such as: What is the impact upon the results if data is aggregated in a larger area rather in census tracts? What would be the role of neighborhoods? What are the possible structural variations to the areas usually defined as neighborhoods? What is the basic unit of real symbolic and cultural significance for residents in each country? Not only were such questions not answered in the book, they were not even posed.

On top of that, just some of the texts explicitly use spatial techniques to measure segregation in terms of spatial clustering of residents. This is surprising, because there is a great deal of literature on geography and urban studies that points out the limits to segregation measures that do not account for spatial contiguity or proximity. Most of the essays are limited to visualization techniques (mapping) of different socioeconomic indicators.

Finally, although the multidimensionality of segregation was covered in most studies, none of them were able to address the problem analytically. What would be the consequences of the difference between a segregated and unequal city from another city which is segregated but equal? What can be said when more than one dimension is combined (immigrants, poor, and ethnic groups) instead of just one dimension in order to generate segregation? These questions emerge while reading the text, but they require a truly comparative perspective in order to be properly addressed.

In conclusion, the reading of the text provides the reader with new and interesting insights on the question of residential segregation and elicits new questions and research problems that still require more attention before a clear perspective on the matter can be reached.