

Book Review: Segregation: A Global History of Divided Cities

by blog admin

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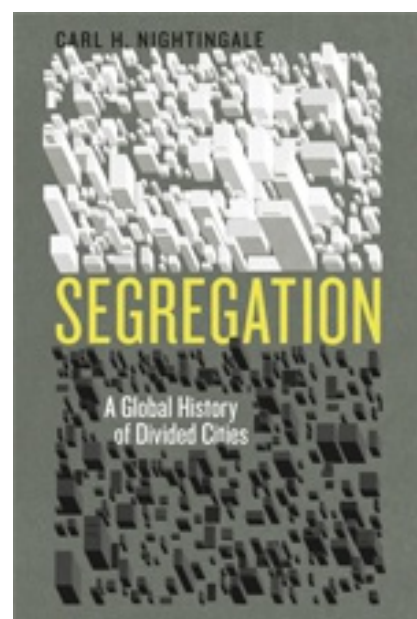
*When we think of segregation, what often comes to mind is apartheid South Africa, or the American South in the age of Jim Crow – two societies fundamentally premised on the concept of the separation of the races. But as **Carl H. Nightingale** discusses in his new book, segregation is everywhere, deforming cities and societies worldwide. Starting with segregation's ancient roots, and what the archaeological evidence reveals about humanity's long-standing use of urban divisions to reinforce political and economic inequality, Nightingale also considers the world of European colonialism. Reviewed by **Laura Vaughan**.*



Segregation: A Global History of Divided Cities. Carl H. Nightingale. University of Chicago Press. June 2012.

Only last month, social housing residents of the London Heygate estate described their displacement by the local authority as “[state sponsored segregation](#)”. One might think that given its popular usage today, social segregation is a feature of recent modern history, yet the use of urban segregation as a tool to reinforce unequal power relations in cities is – according to the author of the comprehensive *Segregation: A Global History of Divided Cities* – seventy centuries old.

[Carl H. Nightingale](#) is an urban historian and his 1993 study of race in Philadelphia, *On the Edge: A History Of Poor Black Children And Their American Dreams*, established the viewpoint of segregation seen through the prism of transnational political and cultural influences that continues in his latest publication. The author's ambit of segregation analysis is much wider than the standard European/US story of industrial cities and mass migration. His book contains a series of chapters starting with the European explorations of the Indian sub-continent and the first conception of populations according to colour and race in the early modern age, moving through East Asia and continental Africa and back to colonial India. Later sections focus on apartheid South Africa, racial segregation in the author's own United States and then the age of the extreme forms of segregation during the “short 20th century”. The book ends with a commentary on contemporary segregation.



The underlying theme of the book is that segregation acts as a political agent above all, assisted by popular support and sustained by the land and economic markets which benefit from it. Thus, ideas of race and colour developed in the 17th century were transported alongside the goods, products and people that travelled across the continents and realised around the globe.

Not all segregation is problematic – as the author himself acknowledges, such as in his discussion of the seminal work of geographer [Ceri Peach](#) on the difference between enforced “bad” and voluntary “good” segregation, but Nightingale maintains that there is essentially no such thing as truly voluntary segregation, seeing as it is always the outcome of unequal power relations. Yet, as the author would be the first to admit, segregation is messy: bearing in mind people will have to mix sometime, somewhere – whether for the segregated to go out to work or for the segregationists to procure goods or services from the segregated. So an understanding of the spatial as well as the temporal, political and other contexts of

segregation is essential to making a full assessment of its impact on the individual.

One of the more impressive aspects of the book is in its consideration of different spatial scales of segregation. Taking the chapter on Spanish settlement in the Americas, for example, Nightingale shows that whilst initial attempts to enforce a colour line led to walled compounds for non-whites to be situated on city edges, the inevitable mixing and intermarriage led to segregation to occur only at the finest scale: within the building block, with the more powerful elite taking possession of the more airy, upper floors of buildings. This is reminiscent of the author's earlier description of how integration was created in the richest of Cicero's Roman neighbourhoods, where a city block would contain a mix of the poor, artisans and the most prosperous inhabitants. Indeed, although Nightingale doesn't state this, [Charles Booth's maps of poverty](#) found a similar pattern in late 19th century London.

Similarly, in describing French-Colonial and South American urbanism, Nightingale shows how early 19th century Algiers was transformed by the creation of a European open street grid alongside the existing inward-facing courtyards and alleyways of the Casbah. The resulting spatial-racial division between native and incoming peoples is shown to have been the outcome of an emergent process, rather than top-down legal apparatus. Here we see the author at his best: in describing the urban setting in rich detail and showing its influence on the parallel social and economic processes.

The drive for breadth leads to some anomalies: the author makes too easy a connection between the separation of gods from mortals in ancient times and the spatial separation by "nations, religions, classes, crafts, clans, castes and the sexes" in more recent times. The reality is after all more complex, as the book's introduction itself lays out: the enforced land clearances under the worst instances of racial discrimination in Ireland, South Africa or the United States can hardly be discussed in the same terms as the suburbanisation of 19th century London, as seems to be implied by the book.

Indeed the book acknowledges this complexity, arguing that there is a paradox in urban segregation, given that in many cases it is the natural outcome of urbanisation – of people of different sorts coming together in the city. Nightingale maintains that the negative impact of segregation is occasionally at odds with the "collective and institutional power" that it can provide to minority groups. In this way the inhabitants of the Jewish Ghetto of Venice actually maintained their cultural distinctiveness *because* of their enforced separation and – just as perversely – Black Americans had to give up on aspects of their cultural uniqueness *in order to* obtain political power during the civil rights movement. Evidently, segregation is a complex process not easily summed up in a word, as this impressive book bears out.

Laura Vaughan is Professor of Urban Form and Society at the UCL [Bartlett Faculty of the Built Environment](#). Her research uses space syntax to study the relationship between micro- and macro- scales of urban form and society and she has published [over seventy articles, book chapters and papers on economic and social exclusion and inclusion](#). She tweets [@urban_formation](#) and blogs at [urbanformation.wordpress.com](#). [Read more reviews by Laura](#).

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