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Social Stratification of the American South

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The Changing South: Economics, Politics and Social Relationships

The American South is a very unique place that possesses distinctive traditions, cultures, values, and functions almost as a separate section of the United States. There is no sign that reads 'Welcome to the South' while commuting to the area of the nation considered to be southern. The south is more than just related to the geographical characteristic of a specific region. It's once a person interacts with the society, understanding the social relationships, engulfing themselves in the culture that someone can declare that they are in the 'south'. The south's traditions, cultures and values are spawned by the unique structure of economics, politics and social relationships established within the society. The structure of those entities of society is drastically different than the way they are ordered other various regions of the United States. The combination of those distinct units in that culture makes the South what is it today.

The South is known for its exclusive way of life that was based on agriculture, tightly knit social networks, strong customs and ultimately racism. Those that consider themselves 'southerners' have a very strong sense of pride to ensure that their way of life is preserved, even if it is not the ideal way of living in present day America. The tough beliefs of keeping certain groups in power, non-industrializing, separation of social

classes, while holding on to the unjust values set in place decades ago contribute to the continuation of various struggles yet to be overcome since the fall of the confederacy.

Even many years after the fall of the confederacy, the south still functions in the same way, isolating itself from other regions of the nation. Isolation is a common trend found in the southern states in various forms. Some southerners still hold resentment towards their northern counterparts and feel that their way of life is wrong, when actually the north had always functioned better economically, socially and politically. In the south, there are still isolated communities that have little interaction with those outside of their immediate population of the area. Not being able to interact with our communities helps maintain the same traditions and values known for decades upon decades.

The old traditions of the south were not structured around economics, but rather around agriculture and this explains why the south is still far behind in many economical aspects. In the Appalachian Mountain areas of North Carolina, for example, values are planned around old customs that warrant the absence of big business and economical development which continues to hinder the population because of the lack of well paying jobs and loss of revenue generated in the area. With so many other locations functioning in a similar fashion not ideal for the economic well-being of the areas inhabitants, the south will remain an area of high poverty and possess little resources to help lower that rate. Areas such as those in the Mississippi delta have similar problems with poverty as well. Unlike the isolated areas of the Appalachians, the main focuses of society are focused areas, but are reluctant to big business and industrialization, which in turn keep the region in bad shape economically. Some argue that because towns in the south have industrialized somewhat so that small towns now have a Super Wal-Mart or strips of

Fast-food restaurants that the South has changed. Indeed those examples of industrialization are key to economical development of an area, because society has transformed where those specific types of business are almost necessity, but overall, the south has changed very little.

Historically, the South has not been as app to a booming economy, even though cotton and agriculture were high grossing industries for many of the region. Without change in the way the south operates in the business world the rates of poverty will continue to increase and remain significantly higher than northern states. Poverty is a very common trait in the south, especially in rural communities of our most southern states such as Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi. In the United States the definition of child poverty for a family of at least one parent with two children is earning a salary less than \$14,269. As of the year 2000, 17% of children in the United States live in poverty. This number significantly jumps to a staggering 26% in the southern states, which are commonly ranked at the bottom of the list of states living in poverty. More than two-thirds of the bottom 20 rankings of child poverty are found in the south. Mississippi has reported a decrease of child poverty but still has a poverty rate of close to 26% (Southern Education Foundation). Even though the United States as a whole and sections of the South has industrialized and laws have been passed to provide equal opportunities for all ethnic groups and genders, the south still lags behind in this specific area.

Lack of business development in the south is a major factor contributing to these detrimental figures, but the combination of a few others such as the United States Prison system adds to the low socioeconomic status of much of the American south. The prison system hurts the southern population of the country in a much different and harsh way

economically than it does other regions. The south has an overwhelming population of African Americans which are the most popular race being incarcerated for extended sentences. The south has the tradition of the Caucasian race being in power with African Americans having little or no opportunities to better themselves socially but economically as well. The prison system just exacerbates this problem in the African American society, especially in the south. Of the 2.6 million citizens incarcerated, 40% of the population is made of African American males. In the African American community, perhaps as many as 50% will have been in prison (Smith and Hattery). With males in our society being the primary source of income for the American family, the African American race will suffer the substantially which helps the revolving cycle of the population of the south constantly ranking highest in poverty. Change; there is little or no change in the South as far as the elimination of poverty.

The south also has a strong tradition of inequalities, whether it exist in the old habits revolving around racism or the evolution of the blatant racism and segregation into the idea of separation. The south has changed little when considering that the ideas of segregation are still present after decades of legislation outlawing such behavior. In the form of separation, the prison system once again helps reinforce those customs. The racial makeup of our prisons are disproportionably African American and similar to slavery practiced in the south in decades past, African Americans are again second class citizens, especially after being incarcerated in our society. Laws have been set in place to target certain groups of people in our society, mainly the African American male. In the south, where there is such a high concentration of African Americans, with so many behind bars, there are a significant amount of women and children left behind.

Women still cannot obtain equal opportunities and access to resources, even in the corporate world, and with the south not known as a corporate region, women in the south have less opportunities to provide for their families.

The editing to existing laws dealing with drug activity in our society has impacted the Southern African American population in an unreal manner. Many of the laws being edited are those primarily done by African Americans. With so many of the African American population incarcerated or socially disabled upon release the end result for many is to get involved in drug activity. The opportunities presented to African Americans in the south are not equal to those available for whites. Many of African American males have a criminal record and in today's society, those with a record are far less inclined to recover and find a well paying job. Companies generally do not want to hire those that have been incarcerated. With no ability to make a decent living, working for the low paying companies that will hire a convicted felon, many turn to selling drugs to compensate for this loss of income. One of the highest paying drugs to sell is crack cocaine and the sentence for possession with the intent to sell have more than double compared to past sentences. Many take the risk anyway but ultimately end up back in the prison system again; separated and isolated from society.

In the past in the south, many whites wanted to isolate themselves from the African American communities and other groups of people that were believed to be expendable or exploitable. Not only were African Americans targeted and exploited, low income white Americans were victims as well. Low income white and blacks in the society are still placed in the same boat. The epidemic of white Americans living in poverty and incarcerated is still present as well, which proves that in many ways, these

ideas are still practiced in the south. The judicial system the help this new form of segregation becomes authentic. Instead of segregation which was a legal way to isolation of the races, 'separation' is now present in our society which is being performed by tweaks in the legal system after segregation was outlawed.

These changes to the judicial system are evidence of the little political change that has occurred in recent decades reinforcing ideas of the old south. In the United States government, there is still a significant under-representation of African Americans in power. Even though there might be a increase of African Americans in government offices, the number of those in high ranking positioning with the power to change policies set in place to help isolate/separate society is very low. The way our government is structured, one man can not pass a law or make significant changes, committees and executive boards of many officials make the decisions. It helps to have African Americans on those decision boards but they are far outnumbered, often by those who like the way that the communities is organized and are not in favor in change. As a result, problems never see solutions and little change are ever found.

In the south as well in the entire United States there are a small number of African Americans that have the opportunity to become government officials to help create change. This small number can be linked to the number of African Americans that have access to higher education. The United States school system is not an institution of equal opportunities. With such a variation of the quality of education obtained in various parts of the country, it makes it very hard to many to get the education needed to break out of stereotypes and do well, inevitably increasing their socioeconomic status. Along with the variations of education quality obtained based on the tax base of the area surrounding the

school, the south has the combination of overcoming decades of segregation of the school system. The northern states had schools that were segregated but after court decisions such as the one made in the case of Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954, those schools were integrated rapidly compared to the school systems of the south. In the south during the Jim Crow law era, schools for African American did not compare in any way to those for whites. The Negro schools received lower quality books, and were often taught by teachers that were not as qualified as their white counterparts. Society was segregated for such a long time that it almost did not matter if the laws gave people to integrate. This can be explained mainly because the separate communities had grown so accustomed to operating separately that there was no desire to change. That lack of desire can be justified because of the low comfort level experienced by those having to attend a school that is either highly populated white or vice versa.

This separation can be linked to socioeconomic struggles and disadvantages but because of the little desire to integrate even though it was legal decades ago still contributes to how school systems in the south still operate. In the north there are urban areas with a high concentration of African Americans in certain schools districts that deal with poverty and lack of education from their parents in their household, but in the south this situation is exacerbated by the lack of opportunities blacks had in decades past that today's children's parents endured. In these school systems there a significant amount of those living in poverty and is again displayed by the resources the school has and even how the school appears. Like schools in the north and around the country, if the tax base of the school is low, the amount of funding and resources is low. In many counties in Mississippi and Alabama with low tax bases along with urban areas of large metropolitan

cities in the north, the educational system receives little from the government which is then passed on the students in the form of a low quality education. With poor education in today's society, a person cannot provide a proper living for themselves, which contributes to low socioeconomic status, they are forced to remain the areas in which they grew up in, compensate for the lose of income by engaging in illegal activity, end up incarcerated, released from prison only to return to their community and the cycle repeats itself.

In the United States the high school dropout rate is a problem, but it is an even bigger problem for African Americans in the southern states. The most southern states such a Mississippi and Alabama have some of the highest rates of dropping out in the nation. In 2004, close to 40% of Mississippi students dropped out or approximately 16,000 kids ("Drop out Rates"). These numbers have decreased slightly in recent years, but is still the nations leading rate. The reasons of dropping out of school can range in reason. Some do not complete school in order for them work and earn a living to support their struggling family. Some have a family of their own to provide for, which is linked to the high school pregnancy rates in the south. Many students feel that they have no reason to continue on to higher education basically because of the quality of education being received. One of the most telling reasons of the South's drop our percentages is the inability to pay for higher education based on the income of the household which are lower because of the opportunities presented and accessible to the parents of these students.

The south also has a strong sense of community found within the social networks established in small towns and even larger cities. These tightly knit communities are great if the community is functioning for the better of the whole. The problem with these communities is that the members of those networks rarely reach out to others outside to help others obtain resources. Those resources are only available to those that have those connections, and for many such as low income African Americans and even some white Americans they will never be able to establish those networks to help better themselves. One of the gateways to networking is education, preferably higher education. Many living in poverty do not have access to that higher education needed to bond with others to form networks so the opportunities to obtain better resources pass them by.

The lack of opportunities to obtain resources because of the inability to establish networks and receive higher education is a major factor that will keep the south functioning as a separate region of the United States. Factors such as poverty and the overwhelming amount of the population being incarcerated forcing women to be 'breadwinners' are others that show how the South is changing for the worse in some aspects. In other aspects the South is not changing and doesn't show signs of changing in the near future. There are still ideas of institutionalize segregation, racism, inequalities ranging from education to corporate business world of the south.

With the region being so geographically isolated and by southerners have such a sense of pride in how the south used to be and their idea of how it should function in the future while still holding on to previous beliefs makes it such a difficult task to get southerners to change. This unwilling notion to change reiterates the fact that the south will always be unique and regardless of certain changes made to the United States as a

whole compounded with the epidemics the nation possesses the south will remain its own country; isolated not knowing of how necessary change is needed.

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