

An Urban-Rural Happiness Gradient

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Abstract

Data collected by the General Social Survey from 1972 to 2008 are used to confirm that in the United States, in contrast to many other parts of the world, there is a gradient of subjective wellbeing (happiness) that rises from its lowest levels in large central cities to its highest levels on the small town/rural periphery. This gradient, which is present after controlling for many of the characteristics that affect individuals' happiness, is driven by several cleavages: between the size, density and heterogeneity of major central cities and the smaller scale, lower densities and relative homogeneity of areas beyond their borders, and between the black and white Americans differentially present in those locations.

KEYWORDS: HAPPINESS, LIFE SATISFACTION, GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEY, URBAN GRADIENTS, WIRTH'S MODEL, BLACK-WHITE CLEAVAGE

1 Introduction

In an earlier study we used World Values Survey data for 81 countries to study differences in subjective wellbeing¹ between urban and rural residents over the period 1995-2004 (Berry and Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2009). Earlier Veenhoven (1994) and Veenhoven and Ehrhardt (1995) had reviewed the limited literature on the topic and concluded that in less-developed countries happiness was greater in urban places but that this urban-rural differential tended to disappear with economic development. Our analysis confirmed that for many parts of the world there were no urban-rural differences in individuals' happiness: the driving forces were personal characteristics such as age, income, and marriage, with some variation by level of

¹The literature uses different labels for happiness: well-being, subjective well-being, happiness or life satisfaction. Well-being is a general concept encompassing happiness and life satisfaction; subjective well-being is self-reported. Life satisfaction and happiness are conceptually different. The former refers to cognition while the latter refers to affect.

development.² There were exceptions, however: in rapidly urbanizing Asia, subjective well-being was higher in big cities than elsewhere; in Northern and Western Europe and nations with Western European foundations, happiness was lowest in large cities and increased to a maximum in rural areas.³ We confirm our WVS findings for the U.S. in this paper, using the information provided by the General Social Survey over the timespan 1972-2008, providing evidence that runs counter to the last item in Glaeser’s assertion that large cities make us “richer, smarter, greater, healthier, and happier” (Glaeser, 2011). There are many benefits of big-city living; high levels of happiness are not among them.

From the earliest days of the republic, there has been a literature that suggests a cultural predisposition to lower-density living. As Berry (1976b) noted, in 1782, when he wrote *Letters from an American Farmer*, Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur asked “Who, then, is the American?” In answering this question he laid out the set of traits that even today remain an enduring feature of American life. Foremost among these was a love of newness that

²Blanchflower and Oswald (2011) argue that most happiness researchers begin with the concept that inside a human being there is some ‘happiness’ or utility function of general form:

$$\text{Happiness} = f(\text{age, gender, income, education, marital status, diet, other personal characteristics, region characteristics, country characteristics})$$

Their review leads them to conclude that happy people are disproportionately the young and the old (not middle-aged), rich, educated, married, in work, healthy, exercise-takers, with high fruit-and-vegetable diets, and slim. Happy countries are disproportionately rich, educated, democratic, trusting, and low-unemployment (pp.2,25). In the analysis presented in Section 3 of this paper we control for as many of these individual characteristics as permitted by the data source, the General Social Survey.

³There is a parallel literature that deals with residential *preferences* (i.e., where people say they would like to live), as opposed to residents’ *happiness* (the subjective self-assessments of residents of these locations). Fuguitt and Zuiches (1975) and Fuguitt and Brown (1990) report that a succession of residential preference studies point to many millions of people living in large-scale urban and suburban places in the U.S. who preferred a rural or small town residence, especially within commuting range of larger cities, and they argued that these preferences help drive population redistribution. They did not explore whether the realization of preferences increased happiness, however. Our results suggest that they do.

combined with the love of nature to propel Americans away from already-developed areas towards open countryside. The pursuit was made possible by a freedom to move and was seen to be driven by individualism as people with a sense of destiny strove to achieve their goals (De Crèvecoeur, 1782). The same sentiment had been expressed in Britain by Adam Smith in 1776 when he wrote “The beauty of the country besides, the pleasures of a country life, the tranquility of mind which it promises, and wherever the injustice of human laws does not disturb it, the independency which it really affords, have charms that more or less attract everybody.” (Smith, 1776, :IIIi) Elsewhere it has been argued that the predisposition has been a primary driving force behind central city decline as rapid low-density growth has been accompanied by higher-density inner-area abandonment; in Irving Kristol’s words, a good case can be made for a historical, popular effort to create an urban civilization without cities (Kristol, 1972),⁴ generated by a process for which Berry (1976a) coined the term “counterurbanization.”

The rapid growth of large cities during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with accompanying social transformations, led both to grand social theories and to core concepts of an emerging sociology that focused not only on the benefits of urbanization, but also on

⁴The opposite argument has, of course, been argued by generations of thinkers, notably by Jacobs (1993) and Glaeser (2011), both of whom call large cities our “greatest invention.” We do not disagree that urbanization has brought both economic growth and social transformation; otherwise rural to urban immigration would not have been such a potent force. Nor do we disagree with the proposition that suburbanization has been highly subsidized since World War II. What we do argue is that high-density big city environments produce a variety of social ills, whoever the residents, ills that decline both down the urban hierarchy and outward from the city core. Lederbogen et al. (2011) goes further arguing that a variety of mental disorders are more prevalent in large cities, the result of neural responses in the brain to social stress in the urban environment.

urban problems and malaise. In Louis Wirth's classic "Urbanism as a Way of Life" (1938) anomie, alienation, and social disorganization were seen to be consequences of the increasing size, higher densities, and greater heterogeneity of the urban-industrial environments that had emerged in the previous century. To be sure, urbanization and economic growth led to rising wealth and health, but greater city sizes also produced greater volumes of human interaction. With interpersonal dependence spread over more people, there was less dependence upon particular individuals and contacts became impersonal, superficial and transitory. Higher population densities produced frequent physical contacts, high-paced living, and the segregation of people in a residential mosaic in which people with similar backgrounds and needs consciously selected, unwittingly drifted, or were forced by circumstances into the same section of the city. For those unable to find a secure life in some specialized role and sub-area, the likelihood of dysfunctional, deviant or pathological behavior increased, particularly where densities were the highest. And with increasing heterogeneity driven by immigrant flows people tended to place emphasis on visual recognition and symbolism.⁵ Place of residence became a status symbol. With no common value sets or ethical systems, money tended to become the measure of worth.⁶ Economic differences became the primary sources of internal structure.

This Wirthian model was built on two foundations, a sociological one based on Durkheim (1893) and a social-psychological one derived from Simmel (1903), as Fischer (1972, 1973)

⁵To quote Wildavsky (1987), "The social filter is the source of preferences."

⁶Easterlin (2003) argues that the pecuniary domain does not have a lasting impact on life satisfaction however, since people adapt to material goods such as houses and cars.

pointed out. At the structural level, size, density and heterogeneity were thought to lead sequentially to differentiation, formalization of institutions and anomie. On the behavioral level, urbanism was thought to produce highly selective responses to the nervous stimulation and to possibilities of psychological overload.⁷ There were opportunities for great economic and social mobility but also adaptations to the challenges of urban life in the form of social isolation and deviance. The two were put together by Wirth's informal acknowledgment that in any social system, structure operates on behavior through the mediation of cognition and is itself an aggregation of individual behavior, which leads directly to the hypothesis examined in what follows—that there should be differences in subjective wellbeing, from lowest levels in the cores of largest cities to highest levels in the rural-small town periphery.

Wirth's hypotheses have received a wealth of support in the 70 years since they were first advanced. That support continues in the recent literature, where we learn that, among many other correlates, people living in the suburbs feel less vulnerable to crime and are less fearful than those in the city, and as a consequence have greater life satisfaction (Adams, 1992; Adams and Serpe, 2000); that residents of urban senior centers have more depressive symptoms than residents of rural centers (Evans, 2009); that the psychological well-being of poor African Americans is higher in rural than in urban areas (Amato and Zuo, 1992); and that environmental and urban conditions operate jointly to reduce life satisfaction in large central cities (MacKerron and Mourato, 2009; Brereton et al., 2008).

⁷Schwartz (2004) shows that the current abundance of choice often leads to depression, feelings of loneliness, anxiety, perpetual stress and even paralysis.

Kasarda and Janowitz (1974) argued that what is critical is the social fabric of the community (i.e., social capital): locally-based social networks can counter anomie and alienation and engender both neighborhood satisfaction and positive feelings about the quality of life, but when they are absent urban problems mount. What is involved is what Putnam (2001) calls the touchstone of social capital, the “principle of generalized reciprocity” with its key components of honesty and trust. Where they are present, usually in smaller settings, residents are likely to express higher levels of life satisfaction than in large central cities, but where they are absent expressed subjective welfare is much lower: happiness should vary by location, rising from inner cities to the urban periphery.

2 Evidence From The General Social Survey

To what extent, we then ask, are feelings of subjective welfare or happiness actually differentiated by location in the United States, controlling for other sources of variations in individuals’ of happiness (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2011; Diener et al., 1999). Is there other evidence that confirms an urban-rural happiness gradient? To answer this question we turn to the rich resources of the General Social Survey (GSS), which provides information on many, but not all, characteristics that have been shown to affect happiness (see footnote 2, above). The GSS has been collected annually since 1972 (biennially beginning in 1994), except for the years 1979, 1981 and 1992. Main areas covered include socioeconomic status, social mobility, social control, the family, race relations, sex relations, civil liberties, and morality. Topical

modules designed to investigate new issues or to expand the coverage of an existing subject have been part of the GSS since 1977, when the first module on race, abortion, and feminism appeared.⁸

We begin with the GSS happiness question:

Taken all together, how would you say things are these days—would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?

Respondents were asked to answer the question on a scale from 1 to 3, where 3 is “not too happy.” We reversed coding so that 3 is “very happy.” The question was asked of each survey respondent in each survey from 1972 to 2008.

To address our primary question, the GSS also enabled us to code respondents’ place of residence as follows, a classification derived from the locational detail provided by the World Values Survey:

Rural areas and small towns	Live in a town with population more than 2,500 and less than 10,000 or in smaller areas or open country.
Suburbs	Live in a suburbs of medium or large cities, or in towns with population between 10,000 and 50,000
Small central cities	Live in a city with population equal to or more than 50,000 and less than or equal to 250,000.
Large central cities	Live in a city with population more than 250,000

Does happiness vary by these locations? Moving averages of respondents’ happiness were calculated by type of location, with the results shown in Figure 1. Consistent with Wirthian theory happiness has been lowest in the nation’s largest cities and has consistently been at its highest levels in small towns and rural areas. This pattern has been remarkably consistent

⁸Further details can be found at <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/cocoon/ICPSR/SERIES/00028.xml>

over the 1972-2008 timespan. The question is whether these differences are attributes of the locations or are attributable to the characteristics of the people living there; i.e., whether location has an effect that is independent of other determinants of happiness.

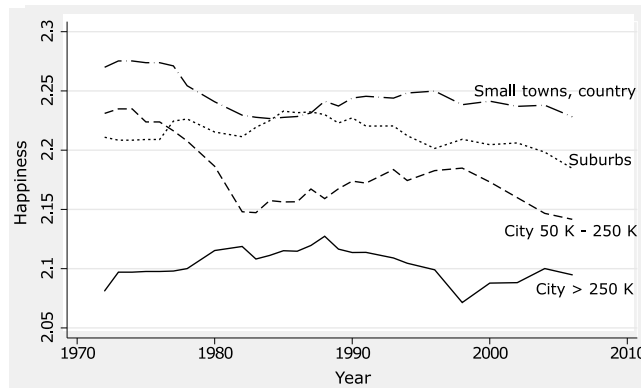


Figure 1: *Happiness by location in the US, 1972-2008*

3 Determinants of Subjective Welfare

To answer this question it is necessary to probe in more detail the factors that contribute to the different levels of happiness seen in Figure 1. Are they locationally specific and independent of the characteristics of the individuals living there, and therefore consistent with Wirthian theory? Happiness researchers are increasingly coming to the conclusion that variations in subjective welfare are driven by a combination of objective life circumstances, social comparison, and the psychological factors embedded in culture that steer world views and are acquired through the process of socialization (Diener et al., 1999; Blanchflower and Oswald, 2011). This conclusion has emerged from the considerable body of happiness research

in psychology (Myers, 2000; Diener and Seligman, 2004; Frey and Stutzer, 2002) and has become an important feature of new approaches to utility functions in economics (Di Tella and MacCulloch, 2006; also see the seminal discussion of experienced utility in Kahneman and Sarin, 1997). In neither of these literatures has there been much attention to location, however. As Easterlin et al. (2010) report on the recent review by Dolan et al. (2008) of the literature on the economics of happiness, urbanization is the last variable discussed out of thirty, with the conclusion that “there is some evidence...that living in large cities is detrimental to life satisfaction and living in rural areas is beneficial,” but “some results are non-significant... More research is needed to explore the source of the benefit of living in less urban areas.” (Dolan et al. 2008:110).⁹

In attempting to fill the gap we follow the example of researchers in both psychology (Myers, 2000; Diener and Seligman, 2004) and economics (Easterlin, 2006; Easterlin et al., 2010) and construct a model in which the dependent variable is the individual’s self-reported rating of life-satisfaction. Because a large number of variables have been found to be significant correlates of happiness in previous models, including age, marital status, employment/unemployment, personal income, family size, health, nativity, religion, relationships with other individuals and groups, etc., many of which tell the same story and are highly correlated, we selected six that have been both consistently significant and reasonably independent to control for personal traits:¹⁰

⁹By urbanization, Dolan et al. (2008) meant living in a larger urban place, and by “less urban areas” they meant smaller towns.

¹⁰Some variables we would have liked to include are not available in the GSS data set, including health

age and age ²	age of respondent, plus the square of age to account for nonlinearity; see Blanchflower and Oswald (2008)
income	self-reported income quintiles
marital status	1 if married
employment status	1 if employed, otherwise
family size	1 if more than 3 persons in the household, 0 otherwise
nativity	1 if born in the U.S., 0 otherwise

To these person-specific measures we add three dummy variables to differentiate place of residence, as specified earlier:

small towns, country	1 if small town or rural area; 0 otherwise
suburbs	1 if suburbs; 0 otherwise
city 50k-250k	1 if small central city; 0 otherwise
base case	central city of more than 250k population

Because locational preferences may have deeper roots in culture (De Crèvecouer, 1782; Choay, 1965; Veenhoven, 1996; Alesina et al., 2004; Dorn et al., 2007), but lacking other possible cultural indicators in the GSS, we add variables that indicate self-reported ancestral roots (Figure 2):¹¹

NW Europe	1 if Northern or Western Europe; 0 otherwise
Mediterranean Europe	1 if Mediterranean Europe; 0 otherwise
Africa	1 if Africa; 0 otherwise
base case	all other countries

status, indicators of social capital, and crime and stress measures.

¹¹Choay (1965), in particular, argues that there is an “Anglo-Saxon” bias in favor of the countryside that contrasts with big city preferences

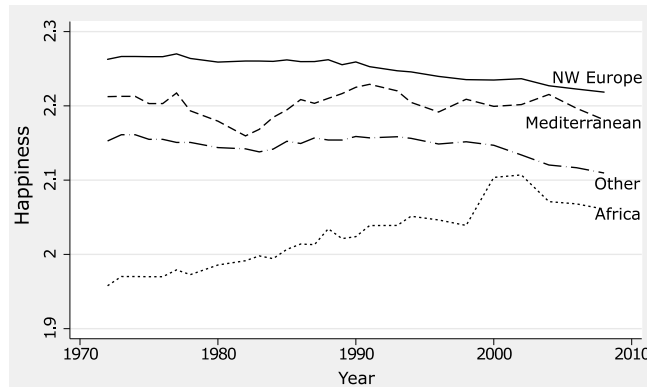


Figure 2: *Happiness by self-reported ancestral origin, 1972-2008*

There also appear to be stark differences in levels of happiness by race and we therefore added race as an indicator. Figure 3 shows some tendency for whites' happiness to decline and that of black Americans to increase as a rising black middle class has suburbanized, but the white-black differential remains throughout the period of study.

white household	1 if respondent lived in a white household; 0 otherwise
black household	1 if respondent lived in a black household
base case	all other households

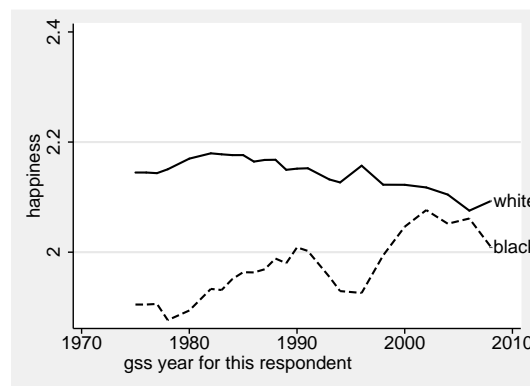


Figure 3: *Life satisfaction, blacks vs whites, 1972-2008*

Because the dependent variable (happiness) is measured on a Likert scale and the observations are derived from a succession of sample surveys from 1972 to 2008 rather than a panel we estimate the models in ordinal logistic fixed-effect form. Such models must be used with caution, producing biased coefficients when sample sizes are small. This is not a problem in our case, however: the samples are sufficiently large to avoid potential bias.

The ordinal logistic equation is:

$$P_{ji} = \Lambda\left(\frac{1}{1 + e^{-(C_j - \mathbf{X}_i\beta)}}\right) - \Lambda\left(\frac{1}{1 + e^{-(C_{j-1} - \mathbf{X}_i\beta)}}\right) \quad (1)$$

where P_{ji} is a probability of outcome j for person i , Λ is cumulative logistic density. C_j is a cutoff point for outcome j (1 not too happy, 2 pretty happy, 3 very happy), β is a vector of coefficients and \mathbf{X}_i is a vector of independent variables for i -th respondent.

The coefficients in such models differ from conventional regression coefficients in that they are odds ratios: a value of 1.0 means that a change in the independent variable does not increase the odds that a respondent will be happier; a value greater than 1.0 means that an increase in an independent variable increases the odds of being happy whereas a value of less than 1.0 means a decrease in the odds of being happy.

The fixed effects are both for sample year and to determine whether there are systematic variations in happiness across each of the multistate census regions defined by the U.S. Bureau of the Census (New England, Middle Atlantic, East North Central, West North Central, South Atlantic, East South Central, West South Central, Mountain and Pacific).

The first year (1972) and the New England region are specified as the base case. We do not report the fixed-effect coefficients in what follows, however, because few of the odds reported differ significantly from their base cases (i.e., not different from year 1972 or region New England): the effects of the other variables are temporally and regionally invariant.

Four versions of equation (1) were estimated. In the first (column 1 of Table 1) the independent variable set included the six personal trait controls plus three place-of-residence variables that were set against the base case of central cities of more than 250,000 population. All the odds ratios are significant. Odds ratios for the control variables confirm that subjective welfare is greater for those who are younger or older (U-shaped effect), wealthier, employed, married and native born, living in households of two or three persons (compare with Blanchflower and Oswald (2011)). Odds of happiness are significantly greater for those living outside large central cities, and there is a significant urban-rural happiness gradient rising to an odds odds ratio of 1.249 in small towns or rural areas, apparently confirming both our earlier results using the World Values Survey (Berry and Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2009) as well as received theory.

Table 1: *Odds ratios in the happiness models*

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
controls for personal traits				
age of respondent	0.950***	0.949***	0.950***	0.949***
age squared	1.001***	1.001***	1.001***	1.001***
income quantiles	1.253***	1.231***	1.239***	1.228***
married	2.180***	2.162***	2.146***	2.146***
unemployed	0.518***	0.520***	0.518***	0.517***
more than 3 persons in household	0.831***	0.860***	0.846***	0.865***
born in the U.S.	1.163**	1.150**	1.167**	1.148**
place of residence (base: city > 250k)				
small towns, country	1.249***	1.148***	1.138***	1.098*
suburbs	1.179***	1.123**	1.091*	1.077
city 50k-250k	1.148**	1.117*	1.102*	1.093
ancestral roots (base: other)				
NW Europe		1.173***		1.114**
Mediterranean		1.079		1.019
Africa		0.807***		1.089
respondent's race (base: other)				
white household			1.097	1.100
black household			0.781***	0.754**
year dummies	yes	yes	yes	yes
census region dummies	yes	yes	yes	yes
N	32072	25219	31437	24715

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

The story may not be quite so straightforward, however. Columns 2 through 4 of Table 1 add different combinations of the variables for self-reported ancestral roots and for race to column 1. Across all four models the coefficients for the personal control variables remain the same, but the inclusion of ancestral origin in column 2, positive for NW Europe and negative for Africa, reduces the magnitude of the odds ratios by location, although the urban-rural gradient remains. In column 3, the substitution of race for ancestry further reduces the locational odds ratios with the gradient still present. When both ancestry and race are included in the model, as in column 4, ancestry and race trump location: only the small-town/countryside locational coefficient remains significant (i.e., people are happier when they live in small town or rural areas) but the urban-rural gradient is gone.

What column 4 captures is a pair of fundamental cleavages, between urban regions and the small town/rural areas beyond, and between Americans of NW European ancestry and those

of black heritage. These cleavages are reinforced by other differences in social composition. As Figure 4 reveals, residents of rural areas are older, and higher proportions are married, native-born and of NW European ancestry.¹² Central cities with more than 250,000 residents have younger populations, fewer are married, native-born or of NW European ancestry, and significantly more are black.

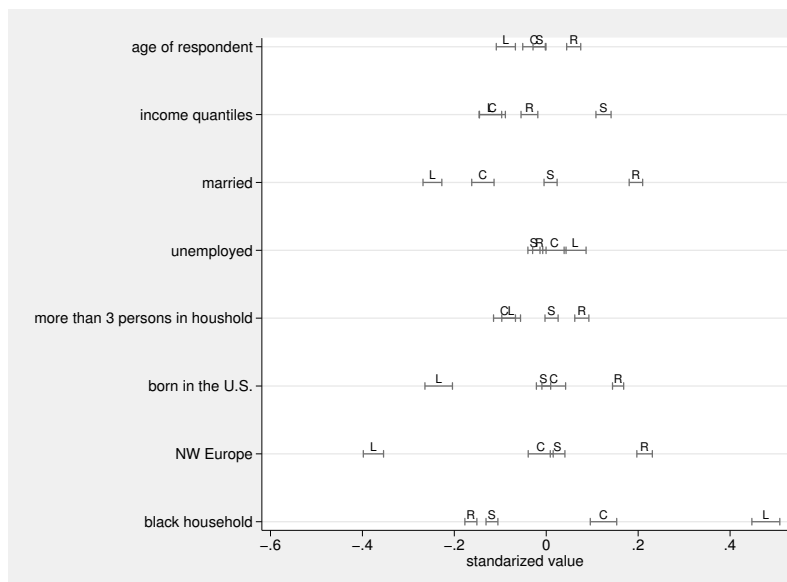


Figure 4: Differences in the characteristics of residents of central cities >250,000 (L), cities 50,000-250,000 (C), suburbs (S), and small towns and rural areas (R). Note: For details see footnote 12.

What appears as an urban-rural gradient can thus be thought to arise from a combination of cleavages. First is that between metropolitan regions and small town-rural locations: respondents living in small towns or rural areas beyond metropolitan boundaries are from 7.7 to 9.8 percent more likely to be happy than those living in metropolitan areas. Overlying

¹²What are portrayed in this figure are 95% confidence intervals around subgroup means for residents of the four types of residence, computed after standardizing each variable to zero mean and unit variance to facilitate comparison

this is a cultural and racial cleavage. NW European ancestry raises the odds of happiness by 11.4 percent in a group that is drawn, de Crèvecouer style, towards suburbs and the countryside.¹³ On the other hand, black Americans, concentrated in the largest central cities, are 24.6 percent less likely to be happy. There is thus an upward pressure towards greater happiness in lower density areas and a downward pressure towards greater unhappiness in large central cities. Combine the two and there is an urban-rural gradient.

4 Conclusions

Wirthian theory predicts an urban-rural happiness gradient that rises from central cities afflicted by the consequences of size, density and heterogeneity to its highest levels in the rural-small town periphery. Evidence from the General Social Survey for the period 1972-2008 reveals that there is indeed such a gradient in the U.S. but that its foundations are more complex. The gradient arises from the combination of a pair of cleavages, one between large urban regions and small-town and rural locations, and the second between black Americans and those of NW European ancestry. The significantly higher levels of subjective welfare in outlying locations are not simply Wirthian, but arise because successful descendants of NW European immigrants continue to be drawn, de Crèvecouer style, towards the periphery, and once there, are happy with the outcome and protective of it. Levels of happiness within central cities, on the other hand, remain low as new immigrant populations, searching for

¹³This is the “Anglo-Saxon bias” postulated by Choay (1965).

opportunity, become victim to the problems of inner-city life. Black Americans, doubly disadvantaged, bring with them to the cities unhappiness stemming from a history of inequality and discrimination, their sense of injustice further eroding subjective wellbeing in big cities. Thus, upward pressures at one extreme and downward pressures at the other converted the consequences of the size/density/heterogeneity cleavage between central cities and other locations into an urban-rural happiness gradient. The collapse of many older central cities and the continued spread of settlement into peripheral areas reflect many things, among them economic restructuring, improved transportation and new communications, but they also reflect equally fundamental feature of American life, the continuing pursuit of the happiness associated with lower-density living and the persistence of cultural difference associated with it.

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