How Suburbs Destroy Democracy

By Michael J. Thompson

The United States is the first suburban civilization in world history. By this I simply mean that it is the first major civilization that has seen the rise of a largely non-urban population, culture, and spatial organization. It is the first to organize itself around the idea that whole swaths of the population can live in a relation of a high degree of economic interdependence, but a high degree of residential and cultural isolation and individualism. It is the first civilization to organize itself on a mass basis and vet be characterized by social atomization. ban civilization is not simply an alternative, non-urban form of residential planning, it is a substantial shift in the contour of everyday life in modern western society. It is a form of life which is characterized by a desire for a more simple environment and has effected a marked decline in the diverse communities that composed the urban landscapes of the prewar period. Suburbs have given rise therefore to a new culture of life; one that, I would argue, when looked at through the nexus of culture, space, and politics, gives of an insight into its corrosive effects on democratic life in modern society.

This thesis is composed from a series of insights that can be culled from reading some of the most seminal texts on urban sociology, economics, and politics. Suburbs provide a spatial pattern of social life that, in my view, actively erodes the interactive social foundations of everyday life therebye, in time, leading to an erosion of democratic sensibilities and democratic forms of life. Whereas urban environments are characterized by diversity, a density of social interaction, and a constant exposure to difference

and newness capable of spawning a sense of openness and constant sense of newness, and ways of innovating and exploring what Georg Simmel referred to as "the technique of life," suburban life is characterized by an isolation from those very activities and external It is defined by the fact that one can isolate oneself from community; it is the spatial manifestation of the liberal political and cultural utopia: to be able to separate public and private at one's own whim and be able to live unencumbered by the various obligations of public and social life. urbanism was seen as an escape: an escape from the conditions of urban life, from the necessity of cooperation and interaction, and the desire-only realizable on a mass scale during the affluence of the post-World War Two economic expansion in the United States-to avoid difference, or, as Lewis Mumford wrote in his The City in History in 1961, "the ultimate effect of the suburban escape in our time is, ironically, a low-grade uniform environment from which escape is impossible."(1)

Less than a decade later in his analysis of the urban-suburban situation in the United States, Richard Sennett wrote about the rise of a "new puritanism" where family life became the focal point of suburban life, a desire to intensify familial relations through the simplification of social environment was sought Sennett was simple and direct in his analysis arguing that "the desire of people beyond the life of economic scarcity is to live in a functionally separated, internally homogenous environment; that is the crux of the matter."(2) For Sennett, as with Mumford, suburbanization represented-albeit in different ways-an erosion of diverse communities, and the emergence of the possibility for individual isolation within the framework of a uniformly homogenous society. For them, as with some other critics of the time, this was leading to an aimless and indeed empty social and cultural life which was something wholly new in modern life and individual consciousness.

The political impact of this, however, is Political analysts and theorists insist on a non-spatial analysis of political life and political culture. The assumption is that individuals live in a spaceless world of ideas, institutions, and culture. think suburban life has a deeper effect not only consciousness and other dimensions of the cultural life of its inhabitants, but on political culture and ideas as well. leading to an insulated form of individualism which eschews cultural difference, it has led to the increased isolation of different groups. Racial and class groups are more segregated between spatial location—i.e., urban centers and their suburban peripheries-leading to what Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton have termed an "American apartheid."(3) The increased emphasis on individual and family life has led to a new provincialism that becomes ignorant of other cultures even as the world becomes increasingly global and interdependent in nature. Urban areas provide increased access to newer, denser social networks and expose their inhabitants to difference and modern urban life tends to have more liberal, more tolerant political values as opposed to suburban and rural areas. Historically, this has always been the case, and new research needs to be done into the deeper dynamics of this aspect of urbanism and its implications for modern political life.

Politics, in other words, should be seen as possessing what could be called a spatial embeddedness. And, by implication, urban and suburban locations also can shape political ideas, values, and voting behavior. The space of everyday life has much to do with the ways that people think about their social and political environment. The lack—or the inconvenient placing—of public spaces, the architectural banality of public buildings,

the relative residential separation and isolation of suburban housing, and the reliance on private car transportation systems, all contribute to an erosion of the public sphere. an indifference to broader political concerns that lie outside of the most immediate issues of communal and individual interests (e.g., those that surround concerns for one's own property value and taxes), and a reinforcing of atomistic individualism, or what thinkers like Robert Putnam have described as a ever lessening "social capital." Culturally, suburbs are largely, if not entirely, cut off from cultural institutions such as museums, concert halls, theaters, universities and the like which enable a new exposure to new sensibilities and to cultivate them to a degree not possible within the confines of suburban life.

With the outer domains of social and cultural life largely absent, suburban life revolves around the institution of the family and the instrumental pursuits of property (specifi-What I have above cally home ownership). called the "new provincialism" has severe effects on critical political reflection and participation. There are two main reasons for this. First, there is the problem of the limitations of self-interest in democratic politics. Suburban life is the spatio-cultural ideal of the normative assumptions of classical liberalism. On the one hand, the ideal of private existence separate from the public sphere was something that was supposed to allow individual liberty to fulfill the dictates of one's own life choices, or modus vivendi. Freed from the restrictions of tradition, servitude to others, and/or religious dictates, the individual was to have sovereign reign over his existence, the means to this existence, and the particular life path that he chose for himself. The only limiting factor was that these choices and actions were not to interfere with others-the social contract was to create a sphere of action where others would not be harmed by your particular freedom. But under conditions of modern life, this has become an aggressively atomistic doctrine that has eroded other forms of social solidarity and communal relations that

once were considered—even by most theorists of classical liberalism—assumed. The pursuit of self-interest at the expense of most social and public aims and goals is the hallmark of modern American life, but it is one that has been intensified, if not made explicitly possible, by spatial embeddedness that suburban life offers. With the very nature of the public now a mere abstraction, participation in it becomes equally so.

The second way that suburban life has had the effect of eroding democratic life is in the way that this new provincialism has laid out a sterile notion of everyday life and existence which has had the effect of the acceptance of some of the most undemocratic forms of life in modern, advanced societies. With little access to a vibrant public sphere or cultural institutions, and lacking a communal style of life that seeks out such institutions and activities, suburban life throws the individual onto two institutions which structure everyday life: the workplace and Both institutions-especially, as Sennett's work points out, the family-are largely hierarchical and anti-democratic in Growth outside of these two institutions becomes difficult within suburban space since the very physical distance from more culturally concentrated urban centers makes access to alternative forms of life and activity difficult. The family becomes dominant institution outside of the workplace which, itself, is highly anti-democratic and stifling.(4) The economics of suburban lifenecessitating huge debt to afford expensive mortgage costs-therefore becomes dependent on rigid forms of employment. With deteriorating benefits of vacation and time away from work, people are more tied to their locations than ever before, and their entrapment in their homes and worklife further alienates them from public life and civic affairs.

The erosion of democratic in places such as the United States therefore has to be seen, in my view, with a view toward investigating the political and cultural effects of residential and spatial structure. Democratic life has always, throughout history, relied on the urban experience: from the Greek polis to the

republicanism of classical Rome through the emergence of the public spheres—the salons. coffee houses of Berlin and Paris-of the 18th century Enlightenment, it is no surprise to see that urban life, experience, residential structure and dense social networks that invigorate and indeed even make society, culture, ideas, possible has always been at the center. Suburban life therefore promotes some of the most reactionary, dull, simplistic, narrow conceptions of social life, political ideals, human desires and wants. To the extent that we can see a form of democratic life begin to erode before our eyes, the spread of the ideal of the American suburb as a utopia for human flourishing ought to be seriously questioned. The more acute political analysts of the past two American presidential elections could see-when they broke the electoral map down by counties instead of merely by states—that liberal-democratic votes were cast almost exclusively in urban or heavily metropolitan counties; all else was a sea of republican and varying degrees of conservative sentiment. This is merely an empirical referent to the thesis I have laid out here. But I think should be seen as a crucial dimension in studying urbanism as well as political ideology in the years to come.

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⁽¹⁾ Lewis Mumford, The City in History, p. 486 (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1961).

⁽²⁾ Richard Sennett, The Uses of Disorder, p. 70 (New York: Knopf, 1970).

⁽³⁾ Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, American Apartheid (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁽⁴⁾ See Sennett's excellent book, The Hidden Injuries of Class for more on this aspect of work life (New York: Knopf, 1972).