The Root and Development of Suburbanization in America in the 1950s

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Abstract

This paper examines some of the major causes and characteristics of mass suburbanization in the U.S. during the 1950s as one of the defining features of American culture. It will first deal with the brief historical overview of cultural as well as institutional forces—the long-cherished ideal of living in suburbs and the federal government policy during the 1930s and after—which led to massive suburbanization in the postwar era. Following these, the paper also shows how home-ownership and suburbanization have interplayed and intertwined with class and racial politics in the U.S., which further reinforced the racially segregated built-in environment and suburbanization. Then, it examines the limits of suburbanization by looking at how the supposed "democratization" of American suburban ideal was largely confined within the perimeter of consumer culture, and how this functioned in the political context of the Cold War in the 1950s.

Key words: suburbanization, consumer culture, suburban ideal, segregated suburbanization, Federal Housing Administration

I. Introduction

As an era of mass suburbanization, many of the stereotypical views of the U.S. during the 1950s—close-knit families, adherence to traditional gender roles, family cars in the driveway, various consumer gadgets vindicating the affluent society—centered on suburbia. In the heightened Cold War setting, this peaceful and contented image of suburban life conferred the meaning of democracy and a good life. As such, a suburban house was as much a cultural statement as architectural work, promulgating the supremacy of the “American way of life” at home and abroad. Thus, as shown in the kitchen debate between Richard Nixon

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and Nikita Khrushchev in 1959, the suburban house became the forefront of the Cold War conflict as much as military buildup. Even though the Cold War receded from history, suburbia still remains as one of the major characteristics in the U.S. It is also closely related to other socio-cultural developments of the post-World War II America such as “conspicuous consumption, reliance upon the private automobile, upward mobility, the separation of the family into nuclear units, the widening division between work and leisure, and a tendency toward racial and economic exclusiveness.”

Given this sweeping influence of suburbia on the American socio-cultural landscape in the post-war era, suburbia and suburbanites alike have been at the center of social discussion. They were subject to criticism as the main culprit of social pathologies including conformism, mindless consumerism, entrenched racism and urban decay. It was ridiculed as “standardized parodies of independence, of leisure, and most important of all, of property that made the first two possible.” Against this criticism, suburbs are also defended for enabling America to live up to the democratic ideal. For example, it is argued that suburbs are “a place where ordinary people, not just the elite, would have access to affordable, attractive modern housing in communities with parks, gardens, recreation, stores, and cooperative town meeting places.”

While equally insightful, these conflicting contentions often tend to obscure the need to see suburbs as a contested and tension-filled site where “hegemonic” meaning of life has been established and challenged. Indeed, hegemony of suburban living has never been complete and required constant management. For example, despite the fact that the 1950s was the period of “broad commercialism and suburbanization” when “the idea of a free world characterized by goods established itself as a pacific social ethic,” TV sitcoms during that time, notably Leave It to Beaver and Father Knows Best, indicate the need of constant exhortation on behalf of this social ethic. Besides, forces tearing apart in the 1960s the complacent façade of the suburban living came from the contained inside of suburbia, i.e., women and youth, as much as its alienated outside, i.e., African Americans.

Given this tension and challenge even in its hegemonic moment of the 1950s, as well as its continued magnitude in contemporary American society in spite of them, this paper aims to examine the postwar suburbanization between 1945 and 1960. Even though much is known about the postwar suburbanization, the general focus was frequently on its factual aspects rather than its historical background.