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Clapson, M.**

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Review Article

The new suburban history, New Urbanism, and the spaces in-between

Andrew Friedman, *Covert Capital: Landscapes of Denial and the Making of the US Empire in the Suburbs of Northern Virginia* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013; pp. 416; ISBN 978-0-520-27465-5); Elaine Lewinnek, *The Working Man's Reward: Chicago's Early Suburbs and the Roots of American Sprawl* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014; pp. 239; ISBN 978-019-976922-3); Benjamin Ross, *Dead end: Suburban Sprawl and the Rebirth of American Urbanism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014; pp. 249; ISBN 978-0-19-936014-7)

What a word we live in. The existential reality of being 'suburban' - an unpopular adjective at the best of times - has been subject to some astounding criticisms recently. People who choose to live in a suburban home are still deemed to be contemptible by a self-consciously urbane commentariat who could never live somewhere so vacuous. According to one newspaper journalist, the religious fascists who attacked Paris in November 2015 were at heart suburban, exhibiting contempt for the diversity and heterogeneity of the sophisticated metropolis because it upset their reactionary world view.¹ And the transatlantic celebrity-historian Simon Schama, appearing on BBC Television's *Question Time* in October 2015, denounced a critic of unfettered refugee migration to Europe for turning away his 'suburban face' to human tragedy.² Can a suburbanite possibly find the wherewithal to bounce back from such criticism? Sadly, there is no great volume of historical literature to give them much inspiration, and more recent scholarship offers little that is truly revisionist.

Back in 2006, *The New Suburban History* called for a more nuanced understanding of the forces and experiences that shaped modern American suburbia, local, regional and national.³ Yet some of its chapter titles belied the continuities from the anti-suburban perspectives of earlier urban historians: 'marketing the free market' or 'how hell moved from the city to the suburbs' or 'suburban growth and its discontents'. In that sense the new suburban history was not really that new at all.

Two of these three books can be situated within this new suburban history and its underlying scepticism towards suburbia. They are certainly fine examples of historical scholarship, and they represent two different ways of looking at the history of American suburbia. Hence they add to the now rapidly growing body of suburban studies. Friedman is a historian, who is critical but insightful in his conspiracy-theory analysis of the postwar Northern Virginia suburbs of the nation's capital. Lewinnek, an expert in American Studies, has written a revealing history of the diversity and legacy of suburban Chicago between 1860 and 1920, although the problems of suburbanisation are never far from the surface. And Ross,

who to be fair to him is no historian, and certainly no expert when it comes to understanding Middle America, hates suburbanisation and wishes it had never happened.

As its unwieldy subtitle implicitly suggests, *Covert Capital* is sometimes a difficult read. Many arguments could have been made more concisely, and there is an impressionistic tendency in Friedman's writing. He draws upon the kinds of *Man in the Grey Flannelled Suit* images beloved of anti-suburban critics since the 1950s to describe dull commuters disgorging from their cars and trains to wage the Cold War behind the walls of the Pentagon. Yet anyone who has travelled either by car or by public transport to Washington DC from Dulles International Airport, named after John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State under President Eisenhower during the 1950s, will be struck by *Covert Capital*. They will have noticed the plushness of the built environment, and the simmering sense of affluence and quiet power that emanates from the large detached houses. Attractively landscaped residential roads and gleaming new edge cities adorn the immediate view beyond the beltway. Drawing upon a wide range of official and academic archives, media sources, and historiographical and literary sources from the Cold War era, Friedman gives shape and meaning to this landscape. His impressive synthesis demonstrates how espionage is intertwined with exurbia, and imperial culture is dovetailed with the more exclusive enclaves of home ownership. Dulles himself was an aggressive anti-communist who with his wife Eleanor enjoyed a specially-designed home in Langley, Virginia. Once the Pentagon and the CIA located in the lush open country nearby, secret intelligence gathering changed the rural character of upstate Virginia. But the CIA hid not only behind the huge car parks, impenetrable walls and pass codes of the state facilities. It also smuggled itself behind the white picket fences and the front porches of upper-middle-class America. Wealthy technocrats, deposed leaders of client states, Cold War spies and loyal allies of the USA were all induced to live in these attractive suburbs. Even the 1960s new town of Reston, viewed by its initiator Robert E. Simon as an antidote to suburban sprawl, became caught up in the suburban reach of the intelligence agencies. Yet as Friedman also shows, American military action in Vietnam, El Salvador and elsewhere in the Global South led to immigration and the growing ethnic diversity of Northern Virginia and its suburbs. Overall, the book is meticulous in its research, a penetrating history of the making of a distinctive suburban landscape in the postwar United States.

Friedman's analysis is mostly located in the sprawling suburbia of the second half of the twentieth century. In *The Working-Man's Reward*, Elaine Lewinnek, documents the earlier origins, development and legacy of American sprawl. The impressive range of sources she uses include commercial and philanthropic primary materials from different archives and museums, local newspapers and magazines, and many histories and sociologies. Focusing upon Chicago and its hinterland from the Civil War decade to the race riots of 1919, she

demonstrates how many different immigrant groups from Europe shaped American suburbanisation. Czechs, Germans, Greeks, Irish, Italians, Poles, Scandinavian and Jewish people all settled around the centre of Chicago. So too did African Americans. In sum, this diverse cohort of pioneering Mid Westerners dreamed of a city of single-family homes stretching out across the prairie. This was of course a very different vision from proponents of tightly-knit urbanism, then and now. Suburbia offered an escape from the alienation of the industrialised workplace, and was located at what most white residents perceived to be a safe distance from the African-American ghettos. Expanding suburbs also promised a self-contained house, domesticity and self-expression, business possibilities in the form of lettings and small-scale cottage industry, and most importantly of all an investment in appreciating land and property values. In common with the urban historian Becky Nicolaides writing some years earlier, Lewinnek proves decisively that working-class America pursued the aspiration of home-ownership.⁴

Developers and realtors wasted little time and effort promoting this dream, and in enabling it to happen. Land was cheap, and there was little if any planning regulation. The consequence was a diversity of suburban localities and households that challenges any notion that suburbia was the essential property of the middle class. African Americans, however, suffering from socio-economic disadvantages, overt racism and stereotyping, were increasingly corralled into the poorest suburbs, or the 'black belt' of slums and poor housing, creating a pattern of spatial and social inequality and tension that erupted in the riots of 1919. In her conclusion, Lewinnek argues that the experience of sprawl in an earlier period of the history of Chicago has lessons for current debate about the future of the city:

Understanding the complex causes of suburban sprawl is perhaps one way to mitigate some of its results: the unsustainable environmental impact; the cost in long commutes and foreclosed mortgages, and the politics of privatisation and segregation. (p. 182)

In this summation Lewinnek is not so far from the principles that inform *Dead End*. But if Lewinnek is concerned with the origins and legacy of American sprawl, Ross is celebrating its ostensible death throes. The dust jacket to *Dead End* claims it is partly 'an engaging history of suburbia' but that is far from the truth. For Ross, who was President of the Transit Committee for Maryland for fifteen years, suburbanisation was a massive cul-de-sac in American urban development. It encouraged privatism, engendered segregation, destroyed inner-urban communities, and created single land-use wastelands that are the antithesis to the cityscape beloved of – no surprise here – Jane Jacobs in her *Death and Life of the Great American Cities*. A comment on the dust jacket of *Dead End* leads readers to believe that Ross is 'always focused on the human perspective'. Sadly, that is misleading. Ross is a

polemicist for urbanism. He has no time for any sensitive or open-minded interpretation of the suburban subjectivities of the USA, past or present. In a few reductionist sentences he belies an elitism with appalling implications:

Death and Life was an instant classic, and it still draws readers after half a century. Yet its message has been very incompletely heeded. Roads are still laid out in superblocks, streets deadened by empty plazas, new buildings kept apart from old. Mixed use and urban density now win the favour of architects and planners but the public often still resists. (p. 70)

That is the trouble with the suburban majority. It just will not do what the elite wishes it would do. Some early-career or senior urban historian should raise the money for a doctoral thesis that might investigate the malign influence of Jane Jacobs as someone who just did not 'get' what millions of Americans wanted, and still want. It could ask how a wealthy woman living in Greenwich Village could possibly empathise with a widening range of suburban experiences in an increasingly affluent postwar North America. It might also explore why so many urbanists uncritically buy into her empirically untested and partisan analysis. Ross is one such character. He also warmly supports the work of American New Urbanists such as Andreas Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, arguing that where possible suburbs should be retrofitted, mixed uses should be encouraged, and 'entire neighbourhoods must be redesigned at once.' (p. 187)

Critics of urbanism are given short shrift, so this short review article can at least try to redress the imbalance. As Tom Martinson argued in *American Dreamscape* (2000) a rare and realistic defence of American suburbia, which contains a few devastating pages critiquing New Urbanism, there is a chasm between the suburban 'yeoman' and the 'authoritarian gentry' of the New Urban movement. Since it surfaced during the 1980s, the movement has been led by an immodest band of post-modern architects proclaiming that they are redrawing the American landscape through densification, smaller housing units with less provision for private garaging, and land use interventions such as 'pedestrian pockets'. This was intended to wean people out of their four-by-fours and onto their feet. Focusing upon Kentlands, a suburb of Washington DC, Martinson demonstrated how this simply led to more cars being parked alongside roads. Sidewalks were not as busy as might have been expected.⁵ It follows therefore that the suburban dream of detached houses and motorised lifestyles is far from dead. Similarly, little evidence is supplied in *Dead End* that intensification and smart growth around rail heads and public transport systems actually humanises anything. Nor does Ross prove with any evidence that it has provided viable and genuinely popular alternative to low-density suburbs.

The American experience has direct implications for the United Kingdom. For over twenty years now New Urbanism has been endorsed by Prince Charles, a future King but even worse, perhaps, a kind of supreme leader for an influential group of architects who include Duany. New Urbanism also interacted with government planning policies. The New Labour Governments from 1997 introduced Planning Policy Guidelines to sharply raise housing densities on both green-field and brown-field sites, while some transport nodes have witnessed a mini-explosion of new and often small-scale apartment dwellings thrown up by private developers. Property prices in established affluent suburbs of larger semi-detached and detached homes have soared as house-buyers put a premium on generous internal and external space provision.

Ultimately, the unwitting testimony of each of these books is that a powerful suburban aspiration, a desire to drive the car and live in a home in the sprawl, has transitioned from the industrial to the post-industrial era. And in the Global South, in some ways taking its cues from the earlier experiences of the industrialised North, many affluent households choose not to live downtown but in burgeoning new suburban communities. Yet the positive lessons for them, and for anyone anywhere who lives in a suburb or who wishes to do so, are still relatively absent from recent histories of suburbanisation.

Both *Covert Capital* and *The Working Man's Reward* offer fresh insights but also familiar criticisms into the nature and consequences of suburbanisation. In this they will be useful to third and fourth year undergraduates of urban history with an interest in the American suburban past. Postgraduate students in American Studies, architectural and urban history will also find the books of interest. They also deserve to be discussed in local history circles in their respective regions. *Dead End* will probably make a fairly conventional contribution to university courses on architecture, planning and urban policy in the USA wherever the critiquing of suburbanisation is on the reading list. It will do little, however, to satisfy the interests of historians and other students of the past who seek to understand a range of positive experiences that do not suit the current urban agenda of sustainable growth.

Mark Clapson

Reader in History

University of Westminster, London

m.clapson@westminster.ac.uk

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