

# The Nation.

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## The Geography of Fear

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Deerfield, Illinois, is little different in appearance from most postwar American suburbs. If a resident of Troy, Michigan, or Alpharetta, Georgia, were to find herself in Deerfield today, the place would feel familiar. A community of mostly single-family detached houses on large, well-landscaped lots along curvilinear streets, Deerfield was a small village on Chicago's periphery in 1950. Its strongest selling point--then and now--is that it was not the city. Like most of Chicago's satellites, it is overwhelmingly white. It is a prosperous community with relatively low taxes and excellent public schools and services. Its location offers economic advantages to area residents. It is convenient to the suburban office parks and malls where the lion's share of metropolitan Chicago's new jobs have been created. Deerfield is part of an increasingly self-contained galaxy of suburbs and exurbs that extends largely unbroken for nearly fifty miles north and west of the city. What remains of the prairie and farmland that once began in Deerfield's backyard is now cordoned off in scattered parks and the occasional undeveloped lot. Most Deerfielders don't even commute to Chicago; they are more likely to be day-trippers than workers in the Windy City.

Almost from the day the first kidney-shaped cul-de-sac was cut into the prairie soil, these metropolitan landscapes have been the subject of intense political debate. In 1961, looking out onto the Deerfields and Levittowns and Park Forests and Lakewoods that had sprung up virtually overnight on the periphery of nearly every major American city, the great urbanist Lewis Mumford lamented the "multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless prefabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold." Our debate about suburbanization has largely been about mass culture and taste, isolation and conformity. Latter-day suburban critics like the acerbic James Howard Kunstler (The Geography of Nowhere) paint a dark picture of a pathological culture of hyper-consumerism that has crushed the small-town *Gemeinschaft* that once supposedly characterized the United States. In contrast, defenders of suburbia and exurbia, like David Brooks, seek to rescue suburbanites, their SUVs and their mega-grills from the condescension of urban, latte-sipping, blue-staters.

Kunstler and Brooks would be interesting footnotes to the culture wars of the past two decades were it not for a large, well-funded,

disciplined movement that has risen up to challenge suburban sprawl. Over the past decade a growing chorus of activists--a motley crew of wealthy suburbanites, urban community development activists, horse farmers, environmentalists, architects and critics--have denounced the mega shopping malls and big-box retailers that drain business from city centers; "McMansions" and vast seas of asphalt that have gobbled up wetlands and family farms; and the gas-addicted soccer moms and office-park dads who clog the roads. While many of these critics have a hard time concealing their disdain for bent-grass lawns and two-story foyers and three-car garages, their argument with suburbia is not primarily cultural. Instead, they contend that sprawl fragments government, maldistributes economic resources and ravages the environment. Armed with studies from the Brookings Institution, the Wharton School and even the US Geological Survey, they advocate "smart growth"--public policies that encourage public transportation, preserve environmentally fragile land and channel investment to older, denser urban centers.

A few dissident activists and intellectuals, mostly libertarian think-tankers and developer-sponsored lobbyists, have tried to defend unregulated, low-density suburban growth. Joining them is architectural historian Robert Bruegmann, whose *Sprawl: A Compact History* provides the most coherent and well-informed defense of sprawl to date. Bruegmann weaves an encyclopedic knowledge of urban planning history into a scathing polemic, lending his book an authority that is lacking in the pro-suburban tracts of writers like David Brooks, and an incisive political edge atypical of academic studies.

Peering out of airplane windows or walking along downtown city streets, Bruegmann is a natural fl&acirc;neur who guides his readers through modern metropolises as diverse as Stockholm, Hamburg, Los Angeles, Portland, Houston and Chicago, with historical detours to ancient Rome, early modern Paris, and nineteenth-century London. Some of his findings are eye-opening. European cities, long appreciated for their urbanity and walkability, are rapidly suburbanizing (only a quarter of Parisians today actually live in central Paris). By contrast, in the past thirty years many American metropolitan areas have grown denser, even as they continue to decentralize. A quarter of the new housing starts in metropolitan Chicago are attached houses. Los Angeles--the epitome of sprawl--is now the densest urbanized area in the United States, with more than 7,000 people per square mile. In the prosperous countries of Europe and North America, at least, sprawl is the norm.

For Bruegmann, this is all to the good. In a libertarian mantra that he repeats throughout the book, sprawl is the outgrowth of the ostensibly universal human quest for "privacy, mobility, and choice." After all, the ancient Romans built suburban villas in the hills of Tivoli and Frascati; bourgeois nineteenth-century Londoners fled to the Surrey countryside; and early twentieth-century New Yorkers overflowed into Brooklyn, Queens and beyond. Sprawl accelerated in the twentieth century, Bruegmann argues, because democracy and affluence allowed ordinary citizens to follow in the suburbanizing footsteps of the wealthy. Our galactic, decentralized metropolises are the result of "millions of individual choices." To curb sprawl would be to snuff out democracy, limit personal choice and ultimately undo the greatest triumphs of modern life.

A market populist, Bruegmann spares no invective in challenging sprawl's critics as a "small cultural elite" blinded by "aesthetic prejudices" and "obvious class bias." Out of touch with middle America, sprawl's critics would, if they had their way, replace suburbia with "an idealized vision of the European city of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries." Bruegmann singles out environmentalists for particular scorn, as heirs of "the hoary tradition of wanting to reform the lives of other people, particularly people who couldn't be trusted to make the right decisions on their own." To those who make "highly subjective" arguments against increased automobile use, dependency on fossil fuel, longer commuting times and the loss of farmland, wetlands and forests, Bruegmann offers a whiggish rejoinder. Why complain? Environmental problems were worse fifty or 100 years ago--and the same affluence that has spurred sprawl has led to a cleaner environment. (What Bruegmann won't acknowledge is that those meddling reformers he vilifies were largely responsible for sanitary and environmental regulations.) True, suburbs and exurbs today are not afflicted by the pall of coal soot that once darkened the skies of Pittsburgh or Cleveland or New York. Lawn fertilizer and automobile fluids running into creeks is nothing compared with the open sewers that ran through American city streets throughout most of the nineteenth century. But the "it used to be worse" comparison leads Bruegmann to dismiss mounting evidence of the long-term cumulative effects of suburban sprawl on global warming and species loss. Even relatively short increases in automobile travel time because of sprawl--when aggregated by the millions--mean more fuel burned and more air and water pollution. Alone, controls on suburban growth and better transportation planning won't solve the problem of global warming. But car dependency surely makes it worse.

Bruegmann's idealized portrait of suburban growth as an expression of democracy and choice obscures the most important criticism of sprawl, namely that it causes and perpetuates economic and racial inequalities. The rapid expansion of suburbia and exurbia has been fueled by the large-scale exodus of whites from central cities and, increasingly, from racially and ethnically diverse older suburbs. Racial inequality is not the only cause of sprawl. But it takes a peculiarly narrow vision of urban history to claim that it isn't crucial. The result has been the growing concentration of poor people of color in central cities; the growth of entry-level jobs in places that are increasingly distant from poor neighborhoods; increased racial segregation in education; and, most important, because of the fragmentation of most metropolitan governments, a lack of political will to grapple with "urban" problems, like concentrated poverty, inferior schools and disinvestment. Sprawl is the geography of inequality.

What is most characteristic about sprawling suburbs today is how they rely on both public and private regulations to circumvent choice. In his deeply researched and well-written book *Bourgeois Nightmares*, MIT historian Robert Fogelson shows that American suburbs have assumed their sprawling form precisely because developers wanted to curb individual choice. In this dark genealogy of suburbia, Fogelson persuasively demonstrates that fear--not future-looking optimism--shaped the geography of metropolitan America. Through the mid-nineteenth century, wealthy and working-class people lived cheek by jowl in American cities. But by century's end, middle-class and wealthy

Americans grew increasingly fearful of their neighbors, especially immigrants and blacks. And they also grew fundamentally distrustful of one another. In America's freewheeling capitalist society, property owners inevitably sought the "highest," or most profitable, use for their property, regardless of its impact on their neighbors. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, developers began to impose "restrictive covenants" that controlled how a property could be developed, how it could be used and who could live there. By the 1920s, restrictions had become ubiquitous; by the 1930s, they were written into zoning laws; and they remain in full force throughout much of sprawl-land today.

The form that metropolitan areas took was not the result of the agglomeration of millions of individual choices: Rather, those choices were structured by a series of increasingly rigid regulations. Most important in shaping the social geography and the environment of suburbs were regulations that specified lot size and forbade multiple-family dwellings, and by so doing priced out poor and working-class purchasers.

The detached suburban house, set back from the street and surrounded by large green yards, was not solely or primarily an expression of a cultural preference for green, open space. It was a device to exclude "undesirables" whose very presence threatened upwardly mobile suburbanites. Other restrictions further blocked access by low-income residents. In the early twentieth century, when most working-class people kept chickens and pigs as a matter of survival, suburban developers put restrictions on household animals, not just to keep out squealing pigs but their owners, too.

The most pernicious tactic that determined the patterns of suburbanization were racial and ethnic restrictions. Beginning in the 1920s, it was commonplace for developers to restrict the use or ownership of houses to "the Caucasian race." Even after the Supreme Court's 1948 ruling that restrictive covenants were unenforceable, prohibitions against "Africans, Negroes, and Ethiopians" (and sometimes Jews and Asians) remained in deeds and continued to shape real estate practices. Until the 1960s it was "unethical" for realtors to introduce "undesirable" groups into a neighborhood. Racial restrictions also shaped federal mortgage lending policies that forbade loans to racially mixed neighborhoods. Most important, they shaped the still-widespread belief that the presence of more than a few blacks in a neighborhood is irrefutable evidence of decline.

The exclusion of these "undesirables" has a long and sordid history, which James Loewen chronicles with zeal in *Sundown Towns*. Through oral histories, research in local libraries and the use of census data, Loewen has uncovered thousands of little-known "sundown towns," places throughout the United States that systematically excluded African-Americans. Loewen found evidence that at least 184 towns marked their borders with signs like one in Hawthorne, California, that read "Nigger Don't Let the Sun Set on YOU in Hawthorne." Loewen estimates that at least 3,000 towns "went sundown," most during the period between 1890 and 1968. Many of these towns had a small number of blacks in the 1880s or '90s but were all-white by 1930. A majority of sundown towns were in the North and West (Illinois alone had at least 456). Blacks knew well to avoid such places--and if they didn't, whites had all sorts of ways, from police harassment to mob violence, to remind them that they were not welcome. The singular contribution of Loewen's

book is to show that white Northerners were every bit as effective in enforcing segregation as the Southern architects of Jim Crow.

Loewen hopes to jar white readers from their sense of racial innocence by uncovering a painful, neglected history of systematic racial exclusion. Most white Americans take for granted the homogeneity of their neighborhoods. Loewen offers the powerful rejoinder that the segregation of blacks and whites (and to a lesser extent other minority groups) was no accident. To make his case, he has compiled countless examples of racial incidents in small towns throughout the country. His approach is not graceful: He piles example upon example, overwhelming readers with grim accounts of racial violence, including riots, lynchings and what could be best described as pogroms against blacks, particularly during racially charged strikes or after black-on-white crimes. Especially forceful are his stories of the everyday harassment of Northern blacks by hotel and gas station owners, police officers, real estate agents--all of whom worked to keep towns all-white. While his chronicle of racial incidents can be numbing and repetitious, the cumulative impact is undeniable.

Loewen made his reputation by skewering inaccuracies in history textbooks--and here he accurately blames local historians for covering up the sordid racist histories of their own towns. Still, those who are skeptical of Loewen's argument will find plenty of gaps in his research.

His findings are often speculative (which, to his credit, Loewen candidly admits). Some of his most provocative assertions rest on tiny shards of evidence; in particular, he relies on oral histories and e-mails from residents of sundown towns, making it difficult to differentiate rumor from fact. In his most dubious historical argument--one that goes against the grain of the last generation of African-American historians, who have emphasized black agency--Loewen argues that the great migration of blacks to major Northern cities was "driven by white opposition." While it is incontestable that some black migrants were refugees from racial violence, they had many good economic and cultural reasons to move to places like Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia and New York. Moreover, by focusing so relentlessly on anti-black sentiment, he overlooks the fact that grassroots black activists--even during the early twentieth-century "nadir" of race relations--protested, litigated and resisted segregation throughout the North, even in sundown towns.

Some of Loewen's most compelling chapters explore "sundown suburbs." In an era of color-blind rhetoric, most whites explain away their lack of black neighbors as a matter of choice (they would rather live with their own kind) or income (they can't afford to live in suburbia). Loewen gives the lie to these arguments. He shows that by overwhelming majorities, blacks prefer racially mixed neighborhoods, almost all of them can afford housing in suburban areas and when they have gotten the chance they have often moved there. But in nearly every predominantly white suburb that has attracted more than a token number of blacks, the newcomers have been nearly universally greeted with white flight from neighborhoods and, especially, public schools.

Suburbs systematically excluded blacks using blunt tools. Orville Hubbard, the mayor of Dearborn, Michigan (the corporate headquarters of Ford Motor Company), from 1942 to 1978, successfully pledged to keep

his city all-white, even though it was bounded by increasingly black sections of Detroit. The nearby Grosse Pointes, among Detroit's most exclusive suburbs, relied until 1960 on a rating system that measured, among other things, the "swarthisness" of a potential home purchaser. Red-lining prevented blacks from getting mortgages, and real estate agents steered blacks to black neighborhoods, regardless of their preferences. Other suburbs justifiably earned a reputation for racial hostility that deterred many blacks from even considering living there.

Deerfield, the exemplar of postwar sprawl on Chicago's North Shore, followed exactly this route. Its developers took advantage of federally guaranteed mortgages. Its town government carefully crafted zoning laws that kept all but middle-class and wealthy home buyers out. And in 1959, when the Progress Development Corporation began construction on two small subdivisions of single-family detached houses that met Deerfield's zoning regulations, all hell broke loose. Local residents discovered that Progress planned a model racially integrated community. One of the town's residents, a partner in a leading Chicago law firm, worked to stop the development by any means necessary. The few Deerfielders who spoke on behalf of the development were heckled; one young lawyer lost his job for taking the "wrong" side in the debate. In a hastily called village referendum, held the weekend before Christmas, town voters overwhelmingly approved a plan to condemn the Progress subdivisions in favor of parkland, even though they had decisively rejected similar plans just a year earlier. Deerfield went sundown. In 2000 its population was just 0.3 percent black.

To a great extent in modern America, where you live determines your economic, educational and political opportunities. But where you live, especially if you are black or working-class or poor, is a matter of constraint as much as choice. Exclusion by class and especially by race has--more than anything else--given modern American metropolitan areas their shape and their distinctive character. From a plane America's metropolitan landscapes seem sprawling and amorphous and incomprehensible, but on the ground the patterns of race and class and inequality and exclusion are visible to all but the most obtuse. Take a stroll down any side street in Deerfield--as long as you leave by dusk--and then make your way to Chicago's West Side. Only fifteen or twenty miles separate the two places, but they are worlds apart.