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The Way We Live Now

How America went suburban, and why.

by Vincent J. Cannato

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Sprawl
A Compact History
by Robert Bruegmann
Chicago, 301 pp., $27.50

SPRAWL. What is it good for? Absolutely nothing, say most critics. Browsing through a university library catalog recently, I found over 20 books on sprawl published since just 2000. Nearly every one of them takes a dim view of the subject, their titles oozing with doom, outrage, dismay, or some combination thereof: *Road to Ruin: An Introduction to Sprawl and How to Cure It*; *Up Against the Sprawl*; *City Limits: Putting the Brakes on Sprawl*; *Sprawl Kills: How Blandburbs Steal Your Time, Health and Money*; and *It's a Sprawl World After All: The Human Cost of Unplanned Growth--and Visions of a Better Future*.

You get the idea.

So one might have low expectations for Robert Bruegmann's recent contribution to the literature. Yet this book is a refreshing antidote to the avalanche of pessimism emanating from the so-called sprawl debate. As Bruegmann writes in his introduction, it seemed as if "so many 'right-minded' people were so vociferous on the subject [of the perils of sprawl] that I began to suspect that there must be something suspicious about the argument itself." He approaches the topic with some much-needed skepticism toward these "right-minded" critics and adds a healthy dose of nondogmatic libertarianism to the mix. The result is an eminently readable and rational book.

What is sprawl? Bruegmann, a professor of art history and architecture at the University of Illinois at Chicago, defines it as "low-density, scattered, urban development without systematic large-scale or regional public land-use planning."

Critics charge sprawl with all manner of sin: causing global warming, pollution, and the depletion of natural resources, aiding the nation's so-called obesity crisis, increasing economic and racial inequality, destroying the family farm, and despoiling open spaces, killing off American cities, encouraging "big-box" retailers like Wal-Mart who underpay their workers and kill "mom-and-pop" businesses, and creating conformist

communities whose residents neglect the public interest for their own personal "privatopia." On top of that, they argue, suburban sprawl is just plain ugly.

The ideology of the anti-sprawl camp is easy to pare down to basics. Cars and roads are bad, public transportation is good. Low-density development is bad, high density is good. Local government is bad. Regional or metropolitan government is good. Private, "unplanned" development driven by the market is bad. Planned development according to the dreams of urban planners is good. Cities are the apex of American civilization and society. Suburbs and exurbs are drab, conformist, and politically reactionary.

Sprawl: A Compact History tugs at nearly every aspect of the anti-sprawl critique and finds many of the theories wanting. Bruegmann also places the issue within the larger historical context. He attempts to show that dispersal from high-density core areas to low-density outer areas is a phenomenon common not just to modern America, but also ancient Rome and 19th-century England. He also argues that sprawl is not simply a phenomenon found in free-market-mad America, but also in more "noble" societies like Europe, Canada, and South America.

We think of central Paris as a wonderful example of how to emphasize high-density urban living, but Bruegmann notes that, between 1962 and 1990, Paris's population dropped by more than a half-million, and saw its population dwarfed by its inner and outer suburbs, filled with single-family homes, industrial parks, and shopping centers. "By 1999," writes Bruegmann, the larger Parisian metropolitan area known as "Ile-de-France had nearly 10 million people, meaning that the city of Paris accounted for fewer than a quarter of all Parisians."

So what really lies behind the arguments against sprawl? Bruegmann seems to pinpoint the issue. Although suburban sprawl, like any other social or economic trend, creates it own set of issues, "the driving force behind the complaints at any period seems to have been a set of class-based aesthetic and metaphysical assumptions, almost always present but rarely discussed."

Although the current sprawl debate dates back to the mid-1990s, it's really a much older story. The crusade against sprawl is merely the latest saga of the battle against suburbia that began in the 1920s, blossomed in postwar America, and continues with today's jeremiads against sprawl.

It was not until after World War II that suburbia became a mass phenomenon. Thanks to a booming economy, lower down payments, and the Federal Housing Administration and GI Bill, even working-class Americans could afford a suburban home. And that seems to have set off much of the criticism. Lewis Mumford captured the feeling when he wrote that suburbia was not much of a problem when it "served only a favored minority . . . But now that the drift to the outer ring has become a mass movement, it tends to destroy the value of both environments without producing anything but a dreary substitute, devoid of form and even more devoid of the original suburban values."

John Keats published his famous satire of suburbia in 1956 called *The Crack in the*

Picture Window, featuring suburban residents John and Mary Drone. And when counterculture icon and self-styled man of the people Pete Seeger sang about working-class suburban housing, they were "little boxes of ticky tacky."

So much for the "people."

The biggest flaw of Bruegmann's book is also its strength. In writing a readable and brief (under 300 pages) review of the current literature and history of suburbia and sprawl, Bruegmann often gives a cursory gloss on some of the arguments against suburban sprawl. A huge ideological infrastructure has gone up to prove the evils of suburban and exurban development and the American government's complicity in creating it. It will take more than one short book to tear the house down. But Bruegmann's history is a start--as is the work of Joel Kotkin and a few others.

Just a few of the conclusions that Bruegmann makes about sprawl are: commuting times nationwide have not increased dramatically; Los Angeles, often seen as the epitome of sprawl, is actually one of the densest cities in America; densities in most American cities have either leveled off or are increasing; and automobile use in mass-transit-friendly Europe is quickly catching up to American levels.

Bruegmann reminds us that, for years, planners and reformers complained not of low-density sprawl, but of high-density urban settlements. These overcrowded city neighborhoods were seen as incubators of disease, crime, and poverty by progressive reformers. It is no wonder most residents of these areas left for greener and more spacious pastures.

Bruegmann is also skeptical of the conventional wisdom among historians that federal policies, like the FHA, interstate highway system, and federal homeowner tax deduction, helped favor suburbs over cities. He also downplays racism as a factor, noting that black city residents have been just as interested in moving to the suburbs as their white counterparts. In fact, today, immigrant melting pots are more often found in suburbs and exurbs than in big cities. (I recently visited a strip mall in Rockville, Maryland, a classic sprawl community, where a halal meat shop was next to a flower store owned by Indians and across the street from a Peruvian chicken restaurant.)

As for Portland, Oregon--the Holy Grail for anti-sprawlers--Bruegmann devotes a large section to it. Portland is often touted as a model for "smart growth," with a highly planned urban center linked to radial town centers by mass transit, with lots of land set aside outside the city for green space. To opponents, Portland's policies have made land more expensive, creating an upper-middle-class amusement park while pushing sprawl further out beyond the urban growth boundary for those unable to afford Portland. Bruegmann is fairly agnostic on the Portland experiment--it is a beautiful city, after all--but notes its smart growth proposals are not likely to be exported to other cities with much success.

While some critics of sprawl are residents of areas affected by such growth, most of the intellectual and policy critiques are driven by other reasons. The anti suburb and anti-sprawl literature betrays a growing alienation of some of the New Class from modern

American society, as it continually bumps up against reality. "Within the past several decades, many of the people who still think of themselves as progressive have turned pessimistic," Bruegmann writes, "and have concluded that things have actually gotten worse rather than better." As a result, they want to limit growth (actual and economic) and wax nostalgic for an older way of life.

There is more to the debate over sprawl than just anti-Wal-Mart hysteria and anger over traffic. At heart, it's about politics, broadly speaking. The decentralizing trends in living and working patterns, first in suburbs and later in exurbs, have been deeply problematic for the Democratic party and the American left. So have the decentralizing patterns of the American economy in the last several decades, and the ongoing decentralization of information and media.

The postwar suburbs eventually helped break the New Deal coalition. In 2004, George W. Bush carried nearly every fast-growing exurban county, and the exurbs have helped elect Republican governors in once-rock-solid Democratic Maryland and Massachusetts. Some people have argued that exurbs are red-state incubators, where more housing for less money means larger families and growing political power for a more conservative-minded population.

Though Republicans have capitalized on these trends, their ongoing success is not assured. As Fred Barnes and others have noted, the recent gubernatorial election in Virginia was alarming for the fact that not only did the Republican candidate lose large inner suburbs like Arlington and Fairfax, but he also narrowly lost exurban counties like Prince William and Loudoun, normally solid Republican territory.

This should remind us that, while sprawl's critics overstate their case and betray their own personal and social biases, there are some problems in these areas. Suburban and exurban residents are concerned about traffic, congestion--yes, these areas are getting more dense--and the quality of their schools. Big-city problems like crime and gangs have also begun to affect these neighborhoods. In Virginia, this allowed Democrat Tim Kaine to portray himself as a suburban technocrat eager to fix problems.

When Republicans talk about urban issues, they largely speak of inner cities and poverty. The decade of the 1990s was the decade of cities, as mayors across the country challenged liberal orthodoxies in city government. Republicans and right-leaning think tanks helped lead the way. But in the first decade of the 21st century, Republicans need to relearn the language of the suburbs and exurbs. That's where the votes are.

While suburban sprawl might not be everyone's cup of tea, (including mine) sprawl-like communities seem to afford a large number of people the kinds of lives they wish to lead. Sprawl critics have yet to convince large numbers of Americans that their solutions for engineering private choices about how and where to live and work will result in greater social benefits or happiness.

Sprawl is messy, chaotic, and sometimes annoying. In short, it is everything one expects from a free and democratic society. Leave the neat and clean societies for totalitarian regimes. Sprawl creates problems, just like every other social trend; but to

damn it for its problems is akin to outlawing the sun for causing skin cancer.

Robert Bruegmann reminds us that much of the anti-sprawl crusade is a result of a rising level of prosperity, and the complexity of millions of individual decisions made on a daily basis by millions of citizens. Better to have to deal with long commutes and strained infrastructure than malaria, cholera, or declining life expectancy.

In terms of problems, I'd take sprawl any day.

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