



# Sub-Urban or Post-Rural: Suburban Development as a Two-Way Street in the Mid-Twentieth Century

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This article argues that because a center–periphery model has dominated our understanding of postwar suburban growth we have failed to fully understand the rural dimensions of that growth. That misunderstanding resulted from the urban orientation of sociologists who studied the suburbs. As a consequence, we have also not appreciated the extent to which rural political outlooks shaped the postwar backlash against New Deal liberalism in the suburbs.

There’s a slide I use when I discuss the racialized development of the postwar suburb in my survey course of American history. It is an image of a suburban deed with the racially exclusionary language usefully highlighted. “#14: RACIAL RESTRICTIONS,” it starts, and then details that the property may not be “sold, conveyed, rented or leased in whole or in part to any person or persons not of the White or Caucasian race.”

Several years ago, however, one of my students noticed #15, the restriction that comes next in the deed. It prohibits animals. More specifically it stipulates that “hogs, cattle, horses, sheep, goats or similar livestock” were not permitted in this particular development, though residents could have up to twenty-five chickens. Racially restrictive covenants were common across suburbia, and language forbidding nonwhite people from moving in still sits in the deeds of suburban homeowners, whether they realize it or not, to this day.<sup>1</sup> I don’t know, however, how common prohibitions on cattle and sheep were, or are. Such edicts have not attracted much attention from the courts and probably less

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<sup>1</sup> Take, for example, Golden Valley, MN, a near-western suburb of Minneapolis. There the city government is sponsoring a racial-justice project called Just Deeds which, among other things, encourages homeowners to examine their deeds to see whether they contain racially restrictive language. If so, the city then offers help to have the language removed. See [www.goldenvalleymn.gov/equity-and-inclusion/restrictive-covenants.php](http://www.goldenvalleymn.gov/equity-and-inclusion/restrictive-covenants.php).

from scholars. But restriction #15 points to something significant: postwar suburbia grew almost entirely on farmland, and restrictions like these ensured that the land would not be used for farming again. It reminds us that physically, socially, and economically, suburban development transformed rural places at least as profoundly as it changed American cities.

In the mid-twentieth century, those who observed postwar suburban growth as it happened recognized that suburbs brought dramatic change to once-rural areas, but by the 1970s the rural dimension to suburban development had largely been supplanted by a center–periphery model in which very little attention got paid to rural people and rural spaces. That conception of urban decentralization and suburban growth has proved remarkably enduring. Writing in 2009 Andrew Needham and Allen Dietrich-Ward found that while scholarship on the suburbs had revealed considerably more class and racial/ethnic diversity than had previously been understood, the view of the suburbs from the central city had not changed much. “Historians,” they concluded, “have remained largely silent about the relationship between postwar metropolitan areas and the areas beyond the suburbs.”<sup>2</sup> This article charts how that rural aspect of suburban development disappeared from understanding.

It goes almost without saying, but virtually every suburban development in the postwar years was built in rural space, usually on farmland, and either displaced the people living there originally or attracted new residents from even farther hinterlands. Without being too hyperbolic about it, suburbia is where the rural has morphed and vanished. Instead of thinking about the developments filled with little boxes and split-level ranches as “sub-urban” we might better think of them as “post-rural.” Our view of this has been obscured because we have only looked at the suburbs from one direction. That, in turn, has meant that we have missed the way in which rural concerns – political, cultural, economic – shaped the larger political economy of the postwar suburb. If the suburbs have been the fulcrum of American politics for at least several decades now, it means we haven’t fully understood what has shaped those politics.

## YOU KNOW IT WHEN YOU SEE IT: SOME DEFINITIONAL NOTES

Any trip to the suburban or rural parts of America leads pretty quickly into some definitional cul-de-sacs. In 1910 the US Census settled on 2,500 residents as its definition of “city” (in the 2020 Census that threshold was upped to five

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Needham and Allen Dietrich-Ward, “Beyond the Metropolis: Metropolitan Growth and Regional Transformation in Postwar America,” *Journal of Urban History*, 37 (2009), 943–69, 944. In their article, Needham and Dietrich-Ward offer a model of analysis to consider dynamics more regionally. They provide two examples, the upper Ohio river valley and the Phoenix area, to demonstrate this kind of work.

thousand residents or two thousand housing units). Anything that wasn't a city, in the view of the Census, was by default rural.<sup>3</sup> Just after the war, recognizing the suburban growth already taking off and that the older urban–rural conception of the population and landscape no long sufficed, the federal government began defining “metropolitan areas” in 1949. (“Standard metropolitan area” appeared for the first time in the 1950 Census and the Census Bureau has refined its definition several times since.<sup>4</sup>) Rural was now what fell, again by default, outside those metro areas.<sup>5</sup>

Academics have been no more successful in defining rural areas with more precision or in some way independent from metro areas. In 1987 the W. K. Kellogg Foundation funded the National Rural Studies Committee, to promote the study of rural America. Yet even this group of scholars “struggled with the term ‘rural,’” and wound up using “rural,” “nonmetropolitan,” “countryside,” and “hinterlands” more or less synonymously. John Fraser Hart, a geographer who was on the committee, turned the definitional dilemma into something of an inadvertent koan: “the need to understand and define the concept of rural becomes all the more urgent as that concept becomes ever less clear.”<sup>6</sup>

The metropolitan statistical area was also the Census Bureau's way of skirting just how they would define “suburb” even as suburban growth exploded. Perhaps the novelty of suburbs' physical form or their rapid development has made it difficult to come up with a standard definition. In any event, the squishiness of what we mean by “suburb” can lead even experts to different conclusions. Christopher Boone, drawing on the work of others, wrote, “Since 1970, more Americans have lived in the suburbs than in central cities. In 2010 suburbanites outnumbered city and rural residents combined for the first time.” Meanwhile, the Pew Research Center concluded, “25% of the total U.S. population resided in the large suburban counties, up from 23% in 2000. In contrast, the share of the population living in the urban cores remained at 31%.”<sup>7</sup> Both of those statements appeared in 2018.

<sup>3</sup> See [www.census.gov/history/www/programs/geography/urban\\_and\\_rural\\_areas.html#:~:text=Beginning%20in%201910%2C%20the%20minimum,that%20met%20the%20population%20threshold.](http://www.census.gov/history/www/programs/geography/urban_and_rural_areas.html#:~:text=Beginning%20in%201910%2C%20the%20minimum,that%20met%20the%20population%20threshold.)

<sup>4</sup> See [www.census.gov/history/www/programs/geography/metropolitan\\_areas.html](http://www.census.gov/history/www/programs/geography/metropolitan_areas.html).

<sup>5</sup> For a very useful discussion of Census categories see <https://mtgis-portal.geo.census.gov/arcgis/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=49cd4bc9c8eb444ab51218c1d5001ef6>. In 1958 sociologists Kurtz and Eicher were already complaining about a definitional confusion between “suburb” and “rural fringe.” They reviewed a variety of definitions to underscore their point. See Richard Kurtz and Joanne Eicher, “Fringe and Suburb: A Confusion of Concepts,” *Social Forces*, 37 (Oct. 1958), 32–37.

<sup>6</sup> Emery Castle, “The Forgotten Hinterlands,” in Castle, ed., *The Changing American Countryside: Rural People and Places* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1995), 3–11, 9; and John Fraser Hart, “‘Rural’ and ‘Farm’ No Longer Mean the Same,” in *ibid.*, 63–76, 76.

<sup>7</sup> See [https://theconversation.com/the-us-has-become-a-nation-of-suburbs-101501#:~:text=Since%201970%2C%20more%20Americans%20have,residents%2C%20suburbanization%](https://theconversation.com/the-us-has-become-a-nation-of-suburbs-101501#:~:text=Since%201970%2C%20more%20Americans%20have,residents%2C%20suburbanization%20)

In this article I won't attempt to sort out this definitional confusion, nor will I try to sort out what my sources meant when they used the terms "rural" and "suburb." The way these terms have been used has not been consistent and the spaces to which they are applied are certainly not static. When the American Housing Survey announced in 2017 that 52 percent of American households were suburban, 27 percent urban, and 21 percent rural, they based their conclusions on how residents described their own neighborhoods.<sup>8</sup> Suburban and rural, to some important extent, are in the eye of the beholder (or the homeowner). Whatever the statistical realities, people have some affective sense that they are in a suburban or a rural place.

What people called suburbs grew in every region of the country after World War II and the literature about urban–suburban dynamics in the South and Southwest is lively and rich. But I'll say at the outset that my geographic focus will be largely on the Northeast and Midwest and on suburban growth/rural disappearance around the older industrial cities there, though I believe that some of what I have discovered applies to areas in the South and West as well.<sup>9</sup>

### EXPLORERS IN THE "URBAN–RURAL" FRINGE

In the middle third of the twentieth century, clues that suburbanization was both an urban and a rural process were there for anyone who bothered to look. And initially some scholars did.

In a study of population movement within the state of Ohio toward the end of the Great Depression, Warren Thompson counted that just over 76,000 people had moved from nonmetropolitan areas of the state to what he

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continues to largely unabated; [www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/07/29/prior-to-covid-19-urban-core-counties-in-the-u-s-were-gaining-vitality-on-key-measures/#:~:text=By%202018%2C%2025%25%20of%20the,urban%20cores%20remained%20at%2031%25](http://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/07/29/prior-to-covid-19-urban-core-counties-in-the-u-s-were-gaining-vitality-on-key-measures/#:~:text=By%202018%2C%2025%25%20of%20the,urban%20cores%20remained%20at%2031%25).

<sup>8</sup> See [www.huduser.gov/portal/pdredge/pdr-edge-frm-asst-sec-080320.html#:~:text=Although%20most%20existing%20ofederal%20definitions,Americans%20olive%20in%20the%20suburbs](http://www.huduser.gov/portal/pdredge/pdr-edge-frm-asst-sec-080320.html#:~:text=Although%20most%20existing%20ofederal%20definitions,Americans%20olive%20in%20the%20suburbs).

<sup>9</sup> There are excellent studies of the development of Sunbelt and western suburbia and among the best are Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Becky Nicolaidis, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920–1965* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002); and Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001). Darren Dochuk has contributed importantly to this discussion with his study of the religion that rural southern migrants brought with them to southern California in the mid-twentieth century. In his view, central to their religious convictions were antistate attitudes and a loyalty to localism that helped shape the New Right. See his *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011). For a nice overview of some of this discussion see David Chappell, "Did Racists Create the Suburban Nation?", *Reviews in American History*, 35 (2007), 89–97.

called “metropolitan subregions.” Of those, a tick over 40 percent relocated not to the cities themselves but to their “rings.” Urban population, in fact, shrank between 1935 and 1940 according to Thompson’s tally. As he put it, “The central cities lost population in their interchange of migrants with nonmetropolitan subregions, while the rings, particularly the other urban communities and rural-nonfarm communities, gained, to offset in part, the losses of the central cities.”<sup>10</sup> Due north, Amos Hawley studied exactly the same question during exactly the same period in Michigan, and found a remarkably similar pattern. “For some years,” he wrote, “rural to urban migration in the nation as a whole has shown a growing tendency to stop short of the largest cities, gathering instead in the incorporated and unincorporated areas within easy access to large cities.” Further, these migrants appeared to be workers (and their families) displaced as the mines and timber mills in northern Michigan closed. More broadly, after the immigration restrictions imposed by Congress in the 1920s, “rural areas became the nation’s chief ‘reserve’ sources of wage labor,” and that labor pool washed up in suburbanizing, post-rural spaces.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, rural populations had been declining in certain areas since the early twentieth century. The Census data of 1910 shocked many when it revealed population loss in many rural counties, and the First World War only accelerated the trend as the mechanization of agriculture consolidated farm operations and made farmworkers increasingly redundant.<sup>12</sup> Those who looked at population mobility during the 1930s, however, noticed something new. Rural people were still on the move, but rather than getting off the train in Chicago or Cleveland they were getting off a few stops before the end of the line. Or they were driving their Model Ts, taking advantage of newly paved roads, to relocate in a place on the urban periphery.

What happened in Ohio and Michigan seems to have happened across large swaths of the country. Demographer Donald Bogue noted that the onset of the war caused “an almost unprecedented desertion of population from certain very rural areas.” Those people went many places, to be sure, but they certainly made their way to the emerging suburban areas not just around major cities but especially around smaller ones. Places as small as five thousand inhabitants

<sup>10</sup> Warren Simpson Thompson, *Migration within Ohio, 1935–1940: A Study in the Re-distribution of Population* (Oxford: Scripps Foundation for Research in Population Problems, Miami University, 1951), 82, 93.

<sup>11</sup> Amos Hawley, *Intrastate Migration in Michigan: 1935–1940* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1953), 193. Christopher Clark, “The Agrarian Context of American Capitalist Development,” in Michael Zakim and Gary J. Kornblith, eds., *Capitalism Takes Command: The Social Transformation of Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 13–38, 37.

<sup>12</sup> “The Decline of Rural Population,” *Outlook*, 96 (19 Nov. 1910), 615.

had experienced “extensive suburbanization” according to Bogue and he found that suburbanization “was a major development in the vicinity of cities of 10,000 or more inhabitants at all distances from the metropolis.” More significantly for our purposes, Bogue was certain that “cities of 10,000 or more inhabitants which have already been shown to have grown faster than the total population *were also accumulating rural populations about themselves at a very rapid pace.*”<sup>13</sup>

Taking stock of the population shifts brought about by the Second World War, the Census Bureau parsed population numbers with some more geographical specificity. When the bureau reported in 1955 that the total population of the country had increased nearly 8 percent since 1950, it also reported that metropolitan areas had grown almost twice as much (13.7 percent). City growth was much smaller, at only 3.8 percent, so the bulk of that growth happened in the surrounding “rings”: 19.1 percent in the “metropolitan ring urban” and a whopping 46.5 percent in the “ring rural.” Conversely, rural population – defined as those who resided outside standard metropolitan areas – only grew by 0.5 percent. Taken together, these numbers reveal a pattern. The great age of urban population growth across the nation’s industrial heartland had come virtually to an end while rural areas grew barely at all in aggregate (and shrank in many places). This motion from rural to suburb doubtless contributed to a racial sorting as well. Black southerners still migrated into cities in the 1950s and 1960s in the second phase of the Great Migration, but white rural people wound up in the suburban rings.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Donald Bogue, *Metropolitan Decentralization: A Study of Differential Growth* (Oxford: Scripps Foundation for Research in Population Problems, 1951), 10, 14, 16, original emphasis.

<sup>14</sup> Census numbers cited in Walter T. Martin, “Ecological Change in Satellite Rural Areas,” *American Sociological Review*, 22, 2 (1957), 173–83, 178. The percentages of Black residents in older industrial cities continued to rise in the 1950s and 1960s, a function of both in-migration of Black southerners and the exodus of white residents out of the city. The Census recorded that the number of whites living in central cities decreased by roughly 2.6 million during the 1960s while the number of Blacks residing in central cities grew by over 3 million. See US Bureau of the Census, *Social and Economic Characteristics of the Population in Metropolitan Areas and Nonmetropolitan Areas: 1970 and 1960* (Washington, DC: US Bureau of the Census), Table 1. The only group of rural white migrants who moved into central cities during the 1960s were Appalachians who created what journalists called “hillbilly ghettos” in Cincinnati, Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit. See “Okies of the ‘60s,” *Time*, 20 April 1962, 31; “Wanna Go Home,” *Newsweek*, 5 Aug. 1963, 30; Gerald Johnson, “Denizens of Rural Slums,” *New Republic*, 23 May 1960, 14. See also James Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 85. Glotzer, in her study of the Baltimore area, has shown that suburban developments were structured to be racially segregated even before New Deal redlining policies. See Paige Glotzer, *How the Suburbs Were Segregated* (New York: Columbia University

Scholars looking at these population shifts immediately after the war recognized that those metropolitan rings grew with influxes from both the central city and the surrounding hinterlands. Myles Rodehaver studied what was then called the “urban–rural fringe,” in this case around Madison, WI for his dissertation at the University of Wisconsin. He found that suburban development, or what he termed “fringe settlement,” was decidedly “two-directional.” Outside Lansing, Michigan E. H. Moore and Raleigh Barlowe found much the same a few years later. “Southern Michigan has experienced considerable suburbanization in recent decades,” the two wrote, and they echoed Rodehaver almost exactly when they continued, “This movement has stemmed from two directions – from the outward movement of city dwellers to rural areas, and from the increasing tendency for rural people to work in the city but to continue their residence in rural communities.”<sup>15</sup>

When sociologist Nathan Whetten spoke to colleagues at Yale University in 1951 he could announce confidently that “the suburban movement is undoubtedly a two-way process.” He went on to tell the group, “Not only is the population from the city moving out to the nearby rural areas but the adjacent farm areas confronted by the expansion of the cities are themselves caught up in the suburban movement.” Noting that the percentage of nonfarm rural residents had risen from 39 to 57 between 1920 and 1950, Whetten sketched a hypothetical process of rural suburbanization:

This may begin when a daughter from the farm family finds employment in a city office building, or a son gets a job in a department store. Part of the farm is later sold off as building lots; the agricultural enterprise becomes a part-time farm and the farm family gradually takes on a semi-urban orientation.<sup>16</sup>

Notice that rural suburbanization in this hypothetical takes place on two levels. Farmland becomes suburban housing; farm people become suburbanites.

## THE URBAN SOCIOLOGISTS TAKE CHARGE

Scholars did not develop the model of the urban–rural fringe in their studies of the suburbs much after the 1950s, nor did this idea become part of any popular

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Press, 2020). Suburbs themselves were never as lily-white as they have often been portrayed, and in different regions of the country they have seen different mixes of nonwhite residents. See, for example, Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Myles Rodehaver, “Fringe Settlement as a Two-Directional Movement,” *Rural Sociology*, 12 (1947), 49–57; E. H. Moore and Raleigh Barlowe, *Effects of Suburbanization upon Rural Land Use* (Lansing: Michigan State University Agricultural and Applied Science, 1955), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Nathan Whetten, “Suburbanization as a Field for Sociological Research,” *Rural Sociology*, 16 (1951), 319–29, 321.

understanding of suburban growth.<sup>17</sup> The realization that suburban growth “stemmed from two directions” was replaced by an urban-centric view of suburban growth. Perhaps that isn’t altogether surprising. American sociology as an academic discipline had grown up in the city – Chicago first and foremost – and when sociologists began to notice suburban growth in the 1920s they saw the movement of white-collar professionals out of the city. Harlan Paul Douglas, a Congregationalist minister on Sundays and amateur sociologist the rest of the week, noted in 1925 that the suburb “is the push of the city outward ... It is the city trying to escape the consequences of being a city while still remaining a city. It is urban society trying to eat its cake and keep it too.”<sup>18</sup>

That urban perspective came to define most sociological studies of the postwar suburb as well. As Stuart Queen and David Carpenter wrote in 1953, “It appears that in the rural–urban fringe we have a valuable laboratory for the study of urbanization as an acculturation process.”<sup>19</sup> Hofstra University sociologist William Dobriner echoed this five years later. “It is now a commonplace,” Dobriner announced, “that the analysis of the suburban community has become a central ... concern in the study of metropolitan areas and urban society.” He wrote that in 1958, scarcely a decade after the first Levittown opened for business on what had been potato fields and dairy farms.<sup>20</sup> These three sociologists nicely summarized the orientation of much of the field’s research. They approached the topic from the perspective of urban sociology, its conceptual frameworks, biases, and perspectives.

Their departmental colleagues who specialized in rural sociology did little better at grasping the “two-directional” nature of suburban growth. Rural sociology as a distinct subfield coalesced during the 1930s, spurred by the farm crisis of the Great Depression (the first issue of the journal *Rural Sociology* came out in 1936). Its founders saw themselves more as advocates hoping to revive or rehabilitate failing farm communities than as scholars studying their transformation.<sup>21</sup> In taking that position, rural sociologists largely ignored the suburban or even metropolitan dimensions of rural places. That was the indictment that agricultural economist, and University of North Carolina vice president, C. E. Bishop laid out speaking to the

<sup>17</sup> That popular understanding is probably best encapsulated in the phrase “white flight,” which had begun to circulate in the 1950s and neatly explained both suburban growth and urban population decline in older cities.

<sup>18</sup> Harlan Paul Douglas, *The Suburban Trend* (New York: The Century Co., 1925), 3–4.

<sup>19</sup> Stuart Queen and David Carpenter, “From the Urban Point of View,” *Rural Sociology*, 18 (1953), 102–8, 108.

<sup>20</sup> Dobriner, vii.

<sup>21</sup> See Joseph Hickey, *Ghost Settlement on the Prairie: A Biography of Thurman, Kansas* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1995), 13.



agricultural economics conference in 1967. In his presidential address to the group Bishop was blunt from the very start. In his first sentence he charged, “the United States has become an urban society and those of us who work in the rural social sciences have not perceived the significance of the growing urbanization of rural America,” and after laying out his case he called for a “reorientation” of the entire field.<sup>22</sup> Few, apparently, listened, and things did not improve much in the discipline in the subsequent decade. In 1982 sociologist William Friedland filed similar charges against his colleagues. The field of rural sociology, he noted, had been founded early in the twentieth century, and was built upon what he called “a weak conceptual approach” to the study of rural society. That approach, he explained, “viewed the transition to capitalism in terms of polarities of societal types that distinguished small-scale, agriculturally based societies from large-scale, complex, industrial urban societies.” Worse, Friedland claimed, rural sociology remained built upon that shoddy foundation.

One consequence of this, as Friedland saw it, was that rural sociologists had ignored the rural dimensions of suburban growth. Suburbia, therefore, “became a concern – primarily to nonrural sociologists.” He went on, “Although rural sociologists worried about the ‘rural–urban fringe,’ it was left largely to their urban colleagues in general sociology to study suburbia.”<sup>23</sup> It is hard to argue with his assessment: in the fiftieth-anniversary index (1936–85) of *Rural Sociology*, “suburb” is listed a grand total of six times. No wonder, then, that there has been such an overemphasis on the “urban” part of suburbanization and a concomitant neglect of the ways in which suburban growth was shaped by rural migrants and how that has created post-rural landscapes.

Preminent among those “nonrural sociologists” who took a keen interest in the suburbs was Herbert Gans. Not content simply to study suburbia, Gans endeavored to immerse himself in it. And so in 1958 he moved his family into a house in the third iteration of Levittown, the one the company built in Willingboro Township, New Jersey. They stayed for two years. Living there full-time enabled Gans to experience virtually everything about this brand-new community. He went to evening meetings and Sunday barbeques, and talked with residents both formally and informally. Seven years after he and his family left, Gans published *The Levittowners*. It remains a classic of sociological fieldwork and participant observation.

<sup>22</sup> C. E. Bishop, “The Urbanization of Rural America: Implications for Agricultural Economics,” *Journal of Farm Economics*, 49 (1967), 999–1008, 999.

<sup>23</sup> William Friedland, “The End of Rural Society and the Future of Rural Sociology,” *Rural Sociology*, 47 (1982), 589–608, 590–91.

What set people to talking was the book's grand conclusion: the suburbs were not the "little boxes made out of ticky tacky" that so many had lampooned and so acidly. That judgment, as he dissected it in the subsequent pages, was both unfair and wrong. Worse, it carried the odor of class-based snobbery on the part of the urbanites who looked down their noses at what Gans categorized as Levittown's lower-middle- and working-class residents. Suburbs, Gans believed, were "the scapegoat and most convenient target for the fear and distaste that upper-middle class people feel for the rest of the population."<sup>24</sup> No anomie, in Levittown, if you were a Durkhemian; no alienation, if you prefer a Marxist analysis – life in the suburbs was just all right, Gans reported back from the field, and the people there were generally happy, satisfied, and fulfilled.

As this conclusion suggests, *The Levittowners* is a fundamentally a city book in its orientation and epitomized the urban orientation of many of the sociological studies of the new suburbs. Despite the fact that Gans lived for two years on what had previously, and quite recently, been farmland, he did not lose his urban orientation as he studied the place. (Gans indexed "rumors" in the book, but not "rural.") He wrote *The Levittowners* under the sponsorship of the Institute for Urban Studies while working at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. It responded to debates over the suburbs that were urban in their formulation and it set the terms of future discussion of the suburbs from a fundamentally urban point of view. Decision-making processes, individual and family adaptation, political structures – these topics interested the urban-centric sociologists, not the cultures and social structures of rural life.

Though Gans didn't use the phrase, he intended his study to be a rebuttal to the thesis of "white flight" which had already gained traction in the discussion of both urban decline and suburban growth. He found over and over that people hadn't fled the city's racial conflicts but had been drawn to the attractiveness of a new town – more pull than push. In the first two Levittowns, racial integration had precipitated ugly incidents. Across the river in Jersey, however, "the arrival of the first Negro purchaser ... proceeded quietly, uneventfully, and almost unnoticed." An attempt by white neighbors to organize an integrated trip to the community pool was preempted by children, Black and white, who had gone off to the pool together before their parents had gotten the towels and sandwiches ready. By 1964, roughly fifty Black families had moved in.<sup>25</sup> Gans simply did not find, or perhaps did not see, racial hostility on the curvilinear streets of Levittown.

<sup>24</sup> Herbert Gans, *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982; first published 1967), 180.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 378–79.

Perhaps Gans assumed that all his readers already understood that suburban housing and all that accompanied it sprout as the last crop on fields originally graded and smoothed for agriculture. Perhaps the receding rural past was too obvious to readers in the 1960s to bother describing. Even so, there are inadvertent hints at this change from rural to post-rural in this corner of New Jersey. They are implicit in some of the numbers Gans cited at the start of the book. In Levittown's first two years, Gans counted, 77 percent of those who bought houses came from the Philadelphia metropolitan region; 23 percent came from elsewhere. Further, 46 percent of the new Levittowners "had previously lived in what they described as suburban neighborhoods (including 8 per cent from Levittown, Pennsylvania)." As Gans finished with these numbers he found "a third came from urban areas (19 per cent from Philadelphia); and 19 per cent came from small towns."<sup>26</sup> Of his own neighbors, "Two were Anglo-Saxon Protestant couples from small towns ... One of my next-door neighbors was a religious fundamentalist couple from the Deep South whose life revolved around the church."<sup>27</sup>

When Gans did acknowledge that Levittown had once been a rural place, before the construction crews arrived, he condescended. The planning consultant hired by the Levitts "saw his role as one of educating this predominantly rural area to the virtues of master planning." In his conclusion that condescension took on an almost atavistic tone. What he saw among those moving into Levittown was some new version of an old Jeffersonian ethos: "In viewing their homes as the center of life, Levittowners are still using a societal model that fit the rural America of self-sufficient farmers ... Some Levittowners," he believed, "have retained the values of rural ancestors."<sup>28</sup> Rather than attend to the actual ruralness of Levittown, Gans fell back on a set of long-running rural mythologies rooted deeply in the American imagination.

When historians first arrived to study the suburbs their research mirrored sociology almost perfectly. Suburban history has developed as an outgrowth of urban history, not rural history, and among historians the rural aspect of suburbanization was largely overlooked.<sup>29</sup> As Needham and Dietrich-Ward have astutely pointed out, there is something almost Turnerian about this perspective. Not by accident, therefore, the seminal book in the field of suburban

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 31–32.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 418–19.

<sup>29</sup> See the 2007 survey of the state of the field in Ruth McManus and Philip Ethington, "Suburbs in Transition: New Approaches to Suburban History," *Urban History*, 34 (2007), 217–337. They call for studies of how suburbs have evolved over time. Likewise, none of the essays in *The New Suburban History*, for example, tackle the rural transformation brought on by the suburbs, and the word "rural" hardly even appears. See Kevin Kruse and Thomas Sugrue, eds., *The New Suburban History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

history is titled *Crabgrass Frontier*. Historian Kenneth Jackson, in turn, might well have gotten his frontier metaphor from journalist William Whyte, who in 1958 described the suburbs he so abhorred as “wild and chaotic” and went on to characterize them thus: “like the traditional frontier, which was ruled by raw power ... of the knife and the gun, this newest frontier also is ruled by raw power: the power of the almighty dollar.”<sup>30</sup> Westward the course of the suburbs takes its way!

## GRIEVANCE, LOSS AND THE POLITICS OF POST-RURAL CHANGE

Newly suburbanizing areas became the meeting ground for at least three different groups of residents, each of which held different ideas about what the space ought to be. I'll offer a rough typology of suburban residents: one group were those rural residents – often farmers – who watched suburbia pop up all around them and thus witnessed the world they had known disappear permanently before their eyes. A second group were those who moved from central cities out into newly built developments and arrived with a more expansive set of expectations about services than those held by the “old-timers.” Finally, there were those who moved into new developments from rural counties even further from the metropolitan center. These people, to one degree or another, were migrants from areas of economic decline or came looking for better economic opportunities, like displaced farmers from northern Minnesota who moved to the suburbs sprouting around Minneapolis or the Appalachian refugees who moved to the suburbs of Cincinnati and Dayton looking for factory work. Given these different experiences and expectations, conflicts between new urban-focussed residents and formerly rural residents were inevitable. A “revolution,” one writer called it in 1970, “albeit subtler and less violent” than that taking place in American cities, but a revolution nonetheless, where “expanding urban centers meet the resistance of rural America ... the lines of battle have been drawn.”<sup>31</sup> That revolution resulted in some large measure from the meeting of these different groups, with different expectations of what suburbia would mean.

At a basic level, explosive growth inevitably strained existing rural infrastructure. New houses and new residents required new and bigger roads, sewer and

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Needham and Allen Dietrich-Ward, “Beyond the Metropolis: Metropolitan Growth and Regional Transformation in Postwar America,” *Journal of Urban History*, 37 (2009), 943–67. William Whyte, *The Exploding Metropolis* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1958).

<sup>31</sup> Ronald Solove, “Problem on the Fringe: Conflict in Urban–Rural Transition Areas,” *Ohio State Law Journal*, 31 (1970), 125–39, 125.

water systems, and the like. Examining the outskirts of Flint, Michigan, Thomas Brademas found, “Most of the homes in the fringe are without public water supply and there is no sewerage system.” He was certain that Flint was not unusual: “In short, what has and is happening to the Flint, Michigan areas is repeated to a greater or lesser degree in almost all of our metropolitan areas today.” Gans noted archly, “As a rural area, Willingboro township ... had not been noted for lavishness in the provision of public facilities in the past.”<sup>32</sup>

As people flocked to new suburban areas, the existing school systems found themselves overwhelmed with new students, and these too became sites of conflict. “So long as the areas were inhabited almost exclusively by full-time farmers,” Moore and Barlowe found, “the country school houses were usually considered large enough to accommodate all the students.” But as they observed, “once the rural residents started their migration into the area, many of the school facilities became inadequate. School consolidation has provided an answer to this situation, but some ‘old-time’ residents have not been convinced that this is the best solution.”<sup>33</sup> In Richfield, a farm community outside Minneapolis that became Minnesota’s fastest-growing suburb in the 1950s, voters rejected a ballot measure to build a new – and needed – high school during the war. In fact, the town didn’t have one at all, and an advertisement that ran in the *Richfield News* asked imploringly, “Can anyone imagine a village of nearly 10,000 residents without a high school?” Apparently, plenty of people could, since nearly ten years and more than seven thousand new residents later Richfield “ranked among the largest communities in America *without* a high school.”<sup>34</sup>

Schools and sewers cost money and money meant more taxes. Opposition to taxation lay at the root of rural attitudes toward government. Farmers interviewed in Alaiedon Township (Michigan) in 1962 reported that rising taxes (not an influx of nonwhite people) worried them most as the area seemed on the cusp of suburban development. Rising property taxes, they worried, cut most immediately into the economic viability of their farms. In Hendricks

<sup>32</sup> Gans, 17. Thomas Brademas, “Fringe Living Attitudes,” *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, Spring 1956, 75–82, 77. Andrew Highsmith picked up the story of the Flint area in his recent study *Demolition Means Progress: Flint, Michigan, and the Fate of the American Metropolis* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015). Highsmith sees the development of “suburban capitalism” as triumphing over more metropolitan solutions to questions like schools and infrastructure.

<sup>33</sup> Moore and Barlowe, *Effects of Suburbanization*, 25, 29.

<sup>34</sup> Frederick Johnson, *Richfield: Minnesota’s Oldest Suburb* (Richfield, MN: Richfield Historical Society, 2008), 72, 75.

County, west of Indianapolis, farmers also complained about rising property taxes that came in the wake of new residential development.<sup>35</sup>

Zoning and land use constituted a third front in the battle over the nature of post-rural space. Cities had pioneered zoning laws during the Progressive Era, but as late as 1951 only thirty-eight states had passed enabling laws even to permit rural zoning. Even that number, however, overstates the case. By 1951 only 178 rural counties in the entire nation had actually enacted zoning regulations, reflecting a fear that “government” could tell people what they could and could not do with their land.<sup>36</sup> Back in Michigan, for example, farmers who found themselves surrounded more and more by suburban development “felt that zoning would take too many rights away from individual property owners, and that they themselves were capable of coping with any problems the suburban movement might create.”<sup>37</sup>

Farmers might have felt that zoning would take away their rights, but many discovered that without it developers and their new neighbors could take away their livelihoods. The conflicts involved nuisance laws, far more common in rural areas than zoning codes.

Many nuisance laws had been on the books for years and had been designed to create more livable environments in densely populated areas. As suburbia rolled over farmland, those laws were sometimes invoked by new residents against the farmers already operating in the area. Take, for example, the Jordan family, pig farmers in Preble County, Ohio, a rural county thirty miles west of Dayton. In 1965 they found themselves with new neighbors as a “beautiful little subdivision” had been built nearby. The Rockhill family, however, having built a house in that development for \$35,000 (roughly \$300,000 in 2021), found their suburban idyll spoiled by the smells coming from the Jordan’s pig barn and vented by industrial fans. They sued the Jordans in Preble County Common Pleas Court under Jefferson Township’s zoning resolution Article 8, Section 5, which defined “nuisance” behavior. They won, and the Jordans were enjoined from operating their pig farm.<sup>38</sup> How many such cases have made their way through court I cannot say. We simply have not paid much attention to these rural dimensions of suburban politics.

Policing racial boundaries in the new suburbs, however, seems to have been a political objective that united these different suburban constituencies. The story of the Myers family and their attempt to move into Levittown

<sup>35</sup> Charles Sargent, “Urbanization of a Rural County,” *Research Bulletin* (Lafayette, IN, Purdue University Research Station), Sept. 1970, 1.

<sup>36</sup> Mark Friedberger, “The Rural–Urban Fringe in the Late Twentieth Century,” *Agricultural History*, 74 (2000), 501–14, 504–5.

<sup>37</sup> Moore and Barlowe, 29.

<sup>38</sup> See Solove, 136–38.

(outside Philadelphia) in the summer of 1957 has become well known and stands as emblematic of the hostility and violence that Black families faced when they tried to breach those boundaries. Eight white Levittowners were arrested for a variety of offenses committed that night. Less well remembered, however, is that at least two of those arrested had moved to Levittown from the rural hinterlands of Pennsylvania.<sup>39</sup> These two brought racial animus with them to Levittown from places with almost no Black residents and found that it meshed nicely with the bigotry of Philadelphians who moved into the suburb to escape an increasingly Black city.<sup>40</sup>

The anger that erupted as rural space transformed rapidly and relentlessly into post-rural space, whether between neighbors or against Black people, was rooted, at least to some extent, in a sense of loss and dislocation. “Old-timers” saw their world disappear almost literally overnight and the rhythms of their lives permanently altered. That loss was compounded by a sense of helplessness that there was nothing to be done about all the change. Wilbur Goetze farmed in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota and watched with resignation as it morphed into one of the fastest-growing suburbs in the state during the 1950s. “We know it’s inevitable,” he told a reporter, describing the end of his way of life, “and we’re attempting to roll with the punches, but I don’t especially look forward to it.”<sup>41</sup> Where farmers like Goetze went after they were forced to cash out to developers was not something researchers seemed to care about much in the 1950s. “In the limited fringe areas,” two of them predicted grimly in 1953, “the chances of survival for rural people and the rural way of life are slim.” At the same moment in the farm fields north of Philadelphia, farmers seem to have melted away as US Steel built its enormous new Fairless Plant, at least in a study of the process by researchers from Penn. “Some of the

<sup>39</sup> Eva Dombrowkie and Mary Brabazon both came from tiny towns in Schuylkill County, PA, part of the state’s coal country that was by the 1950s played out. For these details see Eva’s obituary in the *Pottsville Republican*, 2 Dec. 1981; and “Brabazon–McMenamin Wedding at Mayfair,” *Pottsville Republican*, 3 Aug. 1948. I have not been able to track down several of the others arrested so the number of rural Levittowners on this list might well be higher. Less well remembered too is that Howard Bentcliff was arrested and charged with vandalism and threats against three white Levittowners who wanted to help the Myers move in, including Lew Weschler, a Jew who found “KKK” spray-painted on his house and a Molotov cocktail in his driveway.

<sup>40</sup> Efforts to create segregated rural space pre-date World War II, as Herbin-Triant has shown in her study of early twentieth-century North Carolina. Elizabeth A. Herbin-Triant, *Threatening Property: Race, Class, and Campaigns to Legislate Jim Crow Neighborhoods* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

<sup>41</sup> Alma Nieland, “Brooklyn Park’s Fields Growing Houses Now,” *Minneapolis Star*, 17 June 1977.

displaced farmers have moved further north,” they wrote, begging the question of what happened to the others.<sup>42</sup>

Some number of those who relocated to new suburbs from even more rural places lived with a sense of a “homeplace” lost, and a sense too of not quite leaving that place behind. Sociologist Myles Rodehaver, studying the growing areas around Madison, WI in 1947, found that “the families which moved from rural places belonged to fewer organizations and they attended meetings of such organizations with less frequency. In addition, they evinced less interest in the affairs of local government.”<sup>43</sup> Twenty years later, the *Monthly Labor Review* came to much the same conclusion: “on the average, migrants reared in rural areas have less income, lower skilled jobs, and less involvement in the community than those raised in cities.”<sup>44</sup> Joseph Yesenosky was born in 1918 to a coal-mining father in a remote corner of southwestern Pennsylvania. Yesenosky spent a year in the army during World War II, and then settled with his wife and children in Levittown.<sup>45</sup> When he died there in 1996 his family asked for donations to be sent to the Ave Maria School in Ellsworth, PA – the tiny place where he had grown up all those years ago.

Naperville, IL was typical of nineteenth-century agricultural towns scattered across the Midwest and was still a “prairie village” at the end of World War II. Then the town’s population almost doubled between 1950 and 1960. Boosters cheered but underneath the applause flowed a current of uneasiness. Mayor William Zaininger had been born in a Naperville of about 3,500 at the start of World War I; in 1960 he presided over a town of 13,000. Even as he trumpeted all of the “progress” happening in the town, he acknowledged that Naperville, “like so many other small communities in this area, has been forced to change from a small town to a suburban city which is part of a large metropolitan complex.” The challenge, as Zaininger saw it, was to

<sup>42</sup> Walter McKain and Robert Burnight, “From the Rural Point of View,” *Rural Sociology*, 18 (1953), 108–17, 111. University of Pennsylvania, Institute for Urban Studies, “Accelerated Urban Growth in a Metropolitan Area: A Study of Urbanization, Suburbanization and the Impact of the Fairless Works Steel Plant in Lower Bucks County, Pennsylvania (critical Defense Housing Area)” [Philadelphia], 1954, ix.

<sup>43</sup> Rodehaver, “Fringe Settlement as a Two-Directional Movement.” As with so much of the sociological research about rural areas and the suburbs, discussions of the “fringe” quickly revealed definitional conundrums. For example, “An examination of studies of the rural–urban fringe indicates that major problems have been created by the lack of a concise definition of the area.” See Kurtz and Eicher, “Fringe and Suburb,” 32–37.

<sup>44</sup> Sheridan Maitland and Stanley Knebel, “Rural to Urban Transition,” *Monthly Labor Review*, 91 (June 1968), 28–32, 29.

<sup>45</sup> There is a set of faded snapshots of Yesenosky’s wife Bertha and their children in their new Levittown house. Bucks County Historical Society, Levittown Community Collection, Box 11, Folder 11.



accommodate all this growth while still retaining “the character of the community.”<sup>46</sup> Though he did not say so specifically, that “character” to which he referred was surely a rural ideal – or, as the *Naperville Clarion* put it, “the refinements of gracious rural living.” Whatever one meant by “gracious rural living” – and in all honesty what did that phrase really mean? – agriculture would not be a part of it. The new housing in Naperville, however “gracious” it might be, went up on farmland. In this, Naperville was no different than any of its neighbors. Flip to the classifieds in the *Chicago Tribune* on 24 October 1954, to pick a date randomly, and Naperville’s J. P. Phelan was ready to sell you “farms in Naperville – vacant property, ideal for subdivision.”

In 1988 *Newsweek* profiled Naperville as a place typical of exurban sprawl. “Once sleepy roads are congested with traffic,” *Newsweek* found, “and while there is more tax money there is also a greater demand for government services.” But by that point it had become apparent that “the qualities that attract baby-boomers – peace, quiet, and simplicity – tend to erode as communities grow.”<sup>47</sup> By that time Naperville had grown to 85,000 people.

The locals were not happy with all the growth, even if their leaders professed to be. “Natives find it difficult to see ‘progress’ in the change,” the magazine reported. “I think the new homes are pretty,” said seventy-six-year-old Marjorie Osborne, who lived in Naperville’s historic district, which she helped to establish in 1986 as a response to the rapid influx, “but 100 years from now will anyone see anything special in them?” After talking to the “natives” in Naperville, *Newsweek* concluded that all the new arrivals were “changing the essential character” of Naperville and towns like it.<sup>48</sup> But then again, Marjorie Osborne wasn’t exactly a “native.” She and her family had moved to Naperville from California in 1951, part of that first wave of postwar suburban growth. She might well have been one of those who confidently believed that Naperville could grow and yet retain its small-town charms. In essence, she wanted to preserve the Naperville of her youth, oblivious to the irony that plenty of older “natives” had doubtless grumbled when her family arrived. By the time *Newsweek* came to visit, the prairie village had become the fourth-largest city in the state. No one was talking much about “gracious rural living” anymore.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>46</sup> “Mayor Zaininger Tells Aims of Administration,” in “Naperville: First in DuPage and First in Progress,” *Naperville Clarion*, Dec. 1960, insert.

<sup>47</sup> “What’s Happening to Our Town?,” *Newsweek*, 15 Aug. 1988, 28–31, 28.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>49</sup> Perhaps not in Naperville but the fantasy persists and no place more so than in California. See Paul Sandul, *California Dreaming: Boosterism, Memory, and Rural Suburbs in the Golden State* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2014).

Even for those who moved out to the suburbs from a central city searching for their slice of the American dream the anxiety of loss loomed. Since developers first began building them in the 1840s, suburbs have promised a rural idyll with all the amenities of the city near to hand. But that idyll has always been illusory, and in two ways. First, as we have already seen, the “rural” that these homebuyers wanted did not involve tractors and manure but amounted to a postcard fantasy of rural living. Suburbia sells an ideal of the pastoral, and as John Archer has nicely discussed, it always has. Second, the pace of development was often so fast that whatever sort of landscape one generation of homebuyers came looking for was liable to be overbuilt quickly. Dolores Hayden has provided a nice seven-part typology of the suburbs, starting with “borderlands” in the early republic and ending (for now) in the “rural fringes,” a phenomenon she dates to 1980.<sup>50</sup> Her periodization underscores that each phase of suburban growth was spurred to some extent by a dissatisfaction with the previous one. The open space, the quiet life, the easy traffic, and the racial exclusivity – those all evaporated as more people moved in looking for exactly those same things and as suburbs were forced to some degree to integrate. Suburbia was a dream not just unfulfilled but unfulfillable, an ever-receding horizon of disappointed expectations chased deeper and deeper into rural America.<sup>51</sup>

An aversion to taxes, the primacy of private property rights, a hostility to government altogether, and a feeling of grievance and loss – these became the rallying cry of the movement that nominated Barry Goldwater for president in 1964 and that triumphed with the election of Ronald Reagan. My suspicion is that the suburban politics of the mid-twentieth century constituted the extension of rural political values into post-rural space, where they mixed with the antiurban animosities city residents had packed up with them in their moving vans. Observers at the time, with their urban-centric view of the suburbs, missed this, and I would argue that we still have yet to come to fully appreciate the extent to which that admixture

<sup>50</sup> See John Archer, *Architecture and Suburbia: From English Villa to American Dream* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005). Archer sees the postwar suburban house as a particularly fraught place where “all the demands and expectations” of postwar culture were focussed. *Ibid.*, 257. Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820–2000* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003).

<sup>51</sup> Sociologist Peter Muller, writing about different phases of suburban growth, believes that “the so-called *rural ideal* ... ‘pulled’ Americans toward the outskirts.” Peter O. Muller, “The Evolution of American Suburbs: A Geographical Interpretation,” *Urbanism Past & Present*, 4 (Summer 1977), 1–10, 1. Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), has described how this foundational irony of the suburbs helped generate the environmental movement and efforts at land preservation.

of urban and rural attitudes in post-rural space helped curdle the mid-century liberal political consensus.

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