

The Periphery and America's Dominant Culture

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INTRODUCTION

In America, the city as suburban metropolis achieved hegemony because America's dominant culture is founded on and adheres to an ideology of suburbanism. As John Kenneth Galbraith asserted, America's dominant is ideological in a qualified rather than doctrinaire sense, readily abandoning belief in order to protect and advance its interests, regardless of the consequences. Self-satisfied and self-interested, it prefers the *status quo* to far-reaching reform. Accordingly, the American city — characterized by a distinctive center / periphery dichotomy — has transformed but gradually as a result of an evolutionary process of change with continuity. Highlighting salient conclusions of a recently completed doctoral dissertation, this paper explores aspects of America's dominant culture to appreciate better its inclination towards the periphery.

Perceived from a car cruising along the freeway, the American city presents a curious spectacle. First encountered is the periphery, an ambiguous territory that gradually emerges from the farmland and the often synthetic nature that dominate the American landscape. Here, behind defensive walls that recall an ancient *bastide*, weaves a golf course, its verdant fairways lined by the substantial residences of affluent and gated communities. There, at the interchange, a shopping mall floats in a sea of asphalt, the stores of national chains anchoring its enormity. To the left, a corporate headquarters rises from a field of grass, the "Stars and Stripes" waving prominently. To the right runs a "strip" crowded with discount stores, shopping centers, and fast-food, bank, and motel drive-ins, each vying for attention from among a bewildering array of signs. Ahead, apparently at random intervals, clusters of abstractly figured office towers and extravagant hotels line the service roads. Everywhere, as far as the eye can see, a canopy of trees overlays the rooftops of suburbia, most of the homes well tended; others, as we cruise along, increasingly in a state of disrepair.

Suddenly, imperceptibly, a threshold is crossed, and the smooth surface of the periphery yields to the rutted deck of the center. The freeway becomes elevated, and the blanket of foliage recedes to reveal a landscape of difference. Here, a factory lies abandoned, its massive walls crumbling and covered in graffiti, roof collapsed, a ruin in the making. There, a "main street" artery lined with vacant and dilapidated storefronts; the road devoid of traffic, sidewalks inhabited by gangs of youths and wanderers pushing grocery carts, a veritable junkyard of broken dreams. To the left, like an apparition, a neighborhood of restored homes, tended gardens in bloom. To the right, a cluster of shops, cafes, and galleries, streets swept clean, sidewalks widened and adorned with trees and ornamental lamp-posts. Ahead, on the horizon, a dense cluster of skyscrapers indicates the core of downtown; upon closer inspection revealed as a landscape remarkable for the ubiquitous presence of parking lots and the

virtual absence of people. Everywhere, until the invisible line of the periphery is transgressed again, stand block upon block of houses, the majority in various states of decay.

Urbanism is a cultural project, the city its most conspicuous manifestation. Fundamentally a consequence of ideology, the city can be prospected to garner greater insight into the nature of culture and culture can be interrogated to foster a more profound understanding of the condition of the city. A temporal and symbiotic relationship exists between urbanism and culture, one that is especially intriguing when prospected in the context of America, a nation in which ideology has been powerful yet especially contradictory to the dominant reality. It begets a supreme irony: an urbanism premised on control becomes the exemplar of a culture professing the sanctity of freedom.

As urbanism is a cultural project, to understand better the nature of the American city it is necessary to probe America and its dominant culture both as idea and condition. Demystification aids identification and abets the exposure of contradictions underlying ideological structures, in the process promoting greater insight into the choices made. Disciplinary investigations usually assume the nature of American culture — that which is identified with "the dominant" — rather than attempt its critical examination. Demystification, cultural historian George Lipsitz asserted, renders more coherent that which initially appears to be chaotic and illogical. It recognizes that a society's most meaningful characteristics are encoded within the ordinary and are revealed most cogently by highlighting the practice of denial rather than consent.¹

Jean Baudrillard contended that America is distinguished by profound contradictions, ensuring that it simultaneously is "powerful and original" and "violent and abominable," a paradoxical condition the significance of which he urged researchers not to discount.² Cultural commentator Andrei Codrescu furthered this perspective, arguing that America may be comprehended best as being both a materialistic and spiritual nation, an essentially conservative republic that advocates individualism while rejecting difference.³ This duality and associated paradox informs prevalent attitudes towards urbanism and culture. The materialistic advances the notion of self-interest and provides a rationale for practices that promote inequality: an individualism that impugns the investment of others is restrained. Its implications are expressed most powerfully in reference to the process and product of city building. The spiritual fosters the generation of myth — that which historian Richard Slotkin defined as the expression of ideology in a narrative employing language metaphorically rather than analytically⁴ — and the creation of an atmosphere in which to question the premise is to be a skeptic at best and a heretic at worst. It denies reality and draws on and revises the past in order to justify the present and retain faith in the imagined future, and it encourages a form of individualism that

does not challenge orthodoxy.

Informed by the spiritual and the material, American urbanism expresses most clearly the self-interest that is the hallmark of the latter. Formulated without pretence to be anything more than utilitarian, the *leitmotifs* of American urbanism are speculation and segregation. Together, they have engendered the city's characteristic aesthetic: a landscape perpetually in the making comprised of both temporally and timelessly ideal conditions, the former denoting the city's retail, office, and industrial park realms, and the latter the residential precincts of suburbia. A leading vehicle of economic development, ostensibly chaotic, closer inspection reveals that American urbanism is characterized by an extreme measure of control predicated on denial: the proscription of any and all that does not accord with the overriding ambition to conserve and enhance property values.

Historically, American urbanism was conceived as a strategem to acquire wealth and power. Contrary to popular belief, the purchase of a homestead often was motivated less by the settler's longing to become a Jeffersonian "tiller of the soil" than by the desire to become enriched through the homestead's resale to speculators, who later would subdivide the acreage for a town development. That the frontier frequently was urbanized prior to its agrarian settlement — a process in which corporate America's railroads figured large — demonstrates the dominant culture's power to generate myth to mask reality. Over time, the frontier myth so obscured its development that only rarely is it recognized that town promoters and speculators usually were drawn from the ranks of America's elite: the planters, merchants, politicians, and judiciary who had the capital and power to promote urbanism and who — by entitlement of position — could exploit the official land grant mechanism.⁵

The processes of city building and mythologization remain unchanged, a reality expressed by the condition of the city. The legacy of nature and the individual are illustrative. Forests are rendered asunder and farms subdivided despite a proclaimed esteem for nature and its husbandman, "the virtuous farmer." Difference is repressed rather than celebrated despite a declared reverence for liberty. Thus, city building reveals that power relations — despite prevailing mythology — privilege commodity rather than "inherent" value. Choreographed by the dominant, it seldom is possible to discern a vision greater than that advancing self-interest.

Also informed by the spiritual and the material, American culture most clearly communicates the former. The spiritual circulates around the notion of universal truth — truth being appreciated in the sense intended by John Kenneth Galbraith as that which is popularly believed rather than that which is absolute.⁶ Accordingly, the spiritual fosters mystification rather than analysis. Its implications are revealed most powerfully in reference to the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of the Constitution. The final composition attributed to Thomas Jefferson, the Declaration advanced the notion of "the common" rather than that of "the people" (a less inclusive notion), a qualification of the utmost relevance to conceptions of the legitimate.⁷ The ultimate fount of power, legal and symbolic, Declaration and Articles are enshrined as America's Scriptures and thus are bestowed an aura of divinity. They impart an ideology, centered on the *leitmotif* of "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness," that signifies the critical territory popularized as the American Way. For the true believer, they provide a wellspring to return to for inspiration. For the skeptic, they present a Rosetta Stone whose decoded texts and subtexts reveal their grounding not in the letter of the law but rather in its spirit.

This is a crucial distinction. Whereas the former must be accepted at face value, the latter is open for interpretation. Or so it would appear, as the ultimate meaning of the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of the Constitution — and by corollary, the realm of the legitimate — is not determined freely but rather as the result of a process in which power relations are operative. Narrowly delineated, the realm of the legitimate is potent: that deemed to be within

being eligible for a maximum of rights and privileges, and that without ineligible except for an absolute minimum. Therefore, despite the wording of their texts, at any moment they ultimately mean no more than that which the dominant culture desires them to mean. This has nourished a contradiction between principle and practice that has been one of America's defining characteristics.

Significantly, the Founding Fathers narrowly delineated the realm of the legitimate, proclaiming a democracy of some men rather than a democracy of all men (regardless of race, class, or ethnicity), as would the French *Jacobins*. Though the Declaration and Preamble to the Articles utilized Enlightenment rhetoric to pronounce "all men" equal, grant unalienable rights, and proclaim America as "a people," this was not, according to the Supreme Court, meant literally, as the case of *Dred Scott versus Sanford* (1857) confirmed. In the historic decision, Justices determined that the expression "all men" did not apply to the racial other because the Founding Fathers — many being slave-owners, hence only selectively enlightened — obviously had not meant it to.⁸ Official arbiter of signification, the Supreme Court surmised that what the Founding Fathers really had meant was all "legitimate" men, which, in pre-Jacksonian America, comprised a relatively small cadre of propertied, white, and Protestant males. By exalting property as the foundation of all other rights, America inherently sanctioned the realm of the private over that of the public.

As America's dominant culture has long privileged social conservatism and demonstrated a propensity towards anti-liberalism, Declaration and Articles have been interpreted accordingly. The possibility that "the people," their representatives, and the elected judiciary might be prejudiced, that individually or collectively they might advocate qualified rather than absolute justice, and that the American democracy might transform into a tyranny in which the majority proscribed the rights of minorities for the common good, was not unforeseen. However, the dominant culture was able, through the manufacturing of myth, to mask the indisputable: that the American democracy is not one of the people, by the people, for the people, but rather one of the dominant, by the dominant, for the dominant. This has enabled pronounced schisms between principle and practice to be tolerated and even justified. Proclaimed a democracy of Everyman, America proved to be a land of inequality and injustice: it was not that the dominant culture particularly desired inequality; rather, it was that it just did not perceive absolute equality to be particularly desirable.

Though America's dominant culture has exploited socio-economic difference, it also has attempted its eradication, especially when deemed to be destabilizing to the status quo. The alternative — engaging difference — necessarily implies a complex and risky strategy that almost certainly involves concession, a practice that is contrary to an American experience distinguished by the violent confrontation of competing visions rather than the more moderate pursuit of middle ground pluralism. As cultural commentator Benjamin Schwarz noted, for most of its history the American experience has been about ethnic hegemony rather than ethnic diversity: the dominant culture generally has manifested a profound disdain for the ethnic other; accordingly, the process of assimilation has been one of purification.⁹

The control of difference was rationalized and justified as a responsible course of action designed to resolve a practical problem, the price to be paid to defend orthodoxy and the common interest. This became the characteristic mindset, operative locally and nationally. Restriction, the Supreme Court decreed, was not contrary to the spirit of the Declaration and Articles. Rather, it was a reasonable action undertaken for the common good. *Plessy versus Ferguson* (1895) — the Supreme Court decision affirming the right of private citizens to segregate on the basis of race — was indicative.¹⁰

America's dominant culture is founded on and adheres to an ideology of suburbanism. Complex and contradictory, qualified

rather than doctrinaire, the ideology of suburbanism is entwined with an American mythology that masks the dominant reality of the American Way and that fosters a nation of true believers that imagines itself as a classless democracy opposed to privilege and the concentration of power. The ideology of suburbanism contends that the social is achieved through the economic and collective progress through individual advancement. It privileges the notions of sociopolitical conservatism and economic liberalism, proclaims qualified support for the liberal notions of rights and social equity, and expresses unqualified support for the doctrine of *laissez faire*.

Sociopolitical conservatism and economic liberalism can be attributed to the early-19th Century condition of America, in which these traits achieved hegemony. As the majority lived reasonably well at the time, the hegemonic ambition was to conserve that which already had been achieved. America's contemporary conservatism — that which argues for caution and security — in part can be appreciated as a legacy of the Depression. Though the tenets of suburbanism have evolved over time, its core belief structure has remained remarkably filial to the ruling conception of the legitimate: that which advances the common, rather than the public interest. America's dominant culture perhaps is most readily distinguishable by that which it is against rather than that which it is for, as symbolized by NIMBY. Neither totally authoritative, absolutely exclusive, nor socioeconomically and politically homogeneous, the dominant culture is contested constantly, existing perpetually in a state of transition. While the dominant is of manufactured consent and consists of all "legitimate" Americans, it also is porous.

The dominant culture maintains a highly selective view of government, considered an adversary when it does not privilege its interests and a partner when it does. It purports to be against all forms of regulation and subsidization — denoted by its aversion towards government and redistributive taxation — yet deems acceptable any and all regulation and subsidization from which it derives direct benefit, such as restrictive covenants and the tax deductibility of mortgage interest.

The dominant has long supported that which advances the interests of the common, even though that advocacy privileges a conception of urbanism and culture that in many respects is inimical to America's governing rhetoric about freedom and classlessness. This propensity has been exemplified by homeowners' associations, one of America's most influential and militant social movements, the contemporary equivalent of the pre-New Deal political machine. Acting like a private government, homeowners' associations generally are authoritarian, demanding complex layers of regulations, a code of conduct or lifestyle, and strict compliance by members: non-adherents face fines or expulsion.

Through coalitions of interest with government and corporate America, the dominant has manifested a remarkable ability to rationalize inequity and to deny complicity. Nowhere is this expressed more powerfully than with respect to the dominant's unwavering support for *de jure* and *de facto* segregation, presented for popular consumption as being sensible, stabilizing, and efficient — an innocuous action undertaken for the common good. So-framed, a journalist for the popular magazine *Newsweek* asserted, without the least trace of irony, that "Americans moved to the suburbs for the best of motives."¹¹

Woven into its institutional structures and contributing essential ingredients to its formula, segregation is of the essence of the American way of city building, constituting the very fabric and figure of the metropolis. From the dominant's perspective, segregation (in part) was understood to enhance property values. It therefore was considered to be desirable as it advanced direct economic gain, a reality according flawlessly with its assertion that the social was achieved through individual economic progress — the term individual inferring all "legitimate" Americans. Among its many consequences, segregation removed the other from the daily experience of the dominant, in the process diminishing whatever obligation once

was felt towards seeking a resolution of inequity.

Today, as the view from the freeway attests, the American city is a sprawling, polycentric, patchwork quilt of autonomous and highly competitive political jurisdictions — some incorporated, some unincorporated, all of which are urbanized, and all of which are socioculturally, economically, and politically interrelated though not necessarily dependent. A multifaceted realm leapfrogging across the landscape for as much as one hundred miles that manifests the nation's extreme oppositions, the American city, as Baudrillard observed, is not so much a plurality as it is an intensity born of rivalry.¹² Stitched together by a comprehensive network of high-speed arteries, it comprises a space of mobility and freeway culture — in which the mall and the shopping center are experienced daily and downtown is encountered only on special occasions — and a landscape of segregated retail/office/industrial park realms and residential precincts in which the single family detached house predominates and the majority reside on the edge. This is not a recent phenomenon but the American city's principal condition throughout most of the 20th Century. It should be evident, therefore, that American urbanism is and has long been synonymous with that which conventional nomenclature refers to as suburbanism, that American urbanization is and has long been a process of suburbanization, and that the American city is and has long been a suburban metropolis — neither a city and suburbs, nor a city of suburbs, but rather a city of cities.

Fiction, film, television, and the media rarely have conveyed a positive image of the American city. In part, this is because the city connotes the space of the center rather than that of the larger metropolitan territory. Associated with the center — the circumscribed domain defined by the political boundary imparting its name to a wider area of urbanization — the city necessarily is identified with the notion of the urban. Implying stasis, abject failure, crime, violence, and minorities, the urban is perceived to be the very antithesis of the American Dream, a not inconsequential linkage in a nation with both a popular and intellectual tradition of anti-urbanism.

The periphery — the territory coinciding with the standard metropolitan statistical area definition of a metropolitan area as utilized by the United States Bureau of the Census — generally is associated with the notion of the suburban, and is comprised of a multitude of districts alternatively referred to as the outer city, the suburbs, and suburbia. The space of suburbia and the locus of contemporary investment and job creation, the periphery is an expansive territory comprised of older tract subdivisions, newer Common Interest Developments — lush islands in a sea of unimproved land — strip plazas, and Edge City nodes, the more prominent of which are punctuated by signature skyscrapers. The periphery represents America as the dominant desires it to be imagined, perceived, and experienced. It implies an ideological territory, one that transcends the constraints of a specific space, process, or morphology to symbolize a condition or state of mind. The periphery connotes America's collective identity and signifies its manifest achievement, simultaneously representing mobility, a desirable ecology, and socioeconomic and political privilege.

Racism, classism, and ethnicism have proven to be fundamental aspects of nation and city building throughout the 20th Century. Racism, classism, and ethnicism neither are the footnotes nor the subtext of American urbanism but rather are part and parcel of the text. Accordingly, they are part and parcel of the Good Life, and as such have tainted the very conception of the American Dream. Racism, classism, and ethnicism have figured large with respect to the American city's distinctive center / periphery opposition; in many respects, racism remains America's Achilles heel. The attraction of suburbia and the suburban metropolis was linked intimately to the rejection of the racial, economic, and ethnic other. It also was related to a rejection of the center's urbanism and sociopolitical structures: the dominant had lost control by the late-1920s, a reality

culminating in the collapse of the center as a cultural project.

With the periphery's resolute triumph — one that occurred prior to the Second World War, much earlier than generally appreciated — and reflecting its ongoing transformation, the significance of center / periphery difference has shifted away from an emphasis on that which each facet is towards a focus on that which each facet represents. This new focus has been reinforced over time as the periphery has become more variegated. If the center once was notable for being comprised of islands of prosperity in a sea of underprivilege, the contemporary periphery is remarkable for the islands of underprivilege that have arisen within a prosperous but receding sea. Effectively, change has rendered the periphery a duality: the periphery of the dominant, and the periphery of the other. Whereas the former continues to proffer the Good Life for the professional-middle class and elite according to the American Way — exclusive space in a space of exclusion — the latter is succumbing to a process of discordant change once largely confined to the center, from a declining tax base, to blight, middle class flight, eroding public schools, homelessness, crime, and violence.

The one as maligned as the other is lauded, center and periphery are appreciated as constituting an inalienable discourse pivoting around a diametric opposition, the former being condemned and the latter praised. The significance of this opposition cannot be overstated: it reifies America's struggle with itself, a conflict in which the America as popularly imagined contrasts sharply with the America as perceived and experienced. This contradiction is revealed nowhere more cogently than in the American city, the center / periphery difference of which represents the essential conflict between the ideals that America espouses and its dominant reality.

While the condition of the American city has transformed throughout the 20th Century, the tendency has been for that mutation to occur gradually, according to a process of change with continuity. The status quo has proven to be resilient, as it has tended to benefit the position of the dominant, a similar reason for why the realm of the legitimate was, and, in a relative sense, continues to be defined narrowly. The dominant has changed over time, broadening gradually until the Depression, then contracting, expanding dramatically postwar, then subsequently contracting, until today it has begun to broaden once again. As it has changed, the dominant has perpetuated control by forging coalitions of interest with corporate America and government, exemplified by the Federal Housing Administration. As the focus of control shifted over time, from that based on race, class, and ethnicity to that premised on race and class, this mindset informed America's center / periphery opposition.

Thus, as we depart the freeway to re-enter the city's domain, the conditions waiting to be encountered largely hinge on the off ramp

selected. To take the first exit is to access the periphery, a territory that remains, despite increasing incongruities, the Promised Land in which membership indeed has its privileges. To take the second exit is to egress to the center, a territory that denotes America's failure, one that, despite evident change, persists as a testament to a lack of will to resolve apparent contradictions. Today, it is no more possible to prospect center / periphery difference without focusing on the condition of the African-American — the racial other that signifies the former — than it is to probe the periphery without focusing on the condition of the Anglo-American — the dominant that denotes the latter. That this contradicts the promise of a nation that imagines itself as the land of liberty is beside the point: it is the American Way, and it informs the figuration of the Good Life.

NOTES

- ¹ George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p. 20.
- ² Jean Baudrillard, *America* (New York: Verso, 1994), p. 88.
- ³ Road Scholar (1993). Roger Weinberg, director.
- ⁴ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), pp. 6 and 25.
- ⁵ John W. Reys, *The Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1965), pp. 349-351 and pp. 370-374 especially.
- ⁶ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Culture of Contentment* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1992), p. 147.
- ⁷ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 17; and John W. Wright, ed., *The Universal Almanac, 1993* (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1992), pp. 50-51.
- ⁸ Melvin Steinfeld, "Dissecting the Declaration of Independence," in Frederick Gentles and Melvin Steinfeld, eds., *Dream On, America: A History of Faith and Practice* (San Francisco: Canfield Press, 1971), pp. 85-93.
- ⁹ Benjamin Schwarz, "The Diversity Myth: America's Leading Export," *The Atlantic Monthly* May (1995), pp. 57-67.
- ¹⁰ Robert Haynes, "Black Houstonians and the White Democratic Party," in Francisco A. Rosales and Barry J. Kaplan, eds., *Houston: A Twentieth Century Urban Frontier* (Port Washington: Faculty Press, 1983), pp. 115-121.
- ¹¹ Jerry Adler, "Bye-Bye, Suburban Dream," *Newsweek* 15 May (1995), p. 45.
- ¹² Baudrillard, *Ibid.*, p. 82.