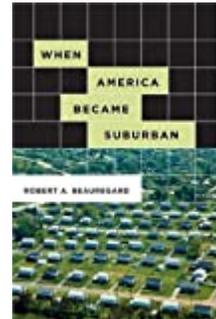




**Robert A. Beauregard.** *When America Became Suburban.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. xvi + 271 pp. \$57.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-4884-9; \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-4885-6.



**Reviewed by** Meg Holden

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## Paradoxes of Parasitic Urbanization

Is massive and consuming urbanization the goal to which all development tends? Robert A. Beauregard's notion of "parasitic urbanization," in *When America Became Suburban*, brings to mind the image of a rapacious capitalist Godzilla, traipsing across the United States following World War II, tearing up decent, self-respecting industrial cities with each gargantuan foot fall, leaving ugly, selfish, sprawling suburbs in their place. This change in urbanization trends, which marked the American abandonment of industrial cities, the birth of the suburbs and sunbelt cities, and the rise of the suburban ideal in American domestic and international politics, economics, culture, and identity, is the subject of Beauregard's attention and analysis in this book.

The paradox that motivates this book is that the period of greatest prosperity for the United States, from 1945 until the recession of the mid-1970s, which Beauregard refers to as the Short American Century, was simultaneously the period of greatest hardship for the country's major cities. During this period, the United States experienced an extreme rupture in development

trends from distributive to parasitic urbanization, or from the kind of urbanization that builds on existing capital and history to the kind that builds at the expense of what is existing, along lines similar to Schumpeterian creative destruction. The rupture itself is seen empirically through the obliteration of both long and short wave cycles of real estate investment, new construction, job creation, and population growth that occurred prior to World War II and reestablished itself again in the mid-1970s. In between these times, as the United States emerged uniquely prosperous after World War II, demand for building no longer led supply, immigration slowed, and U.S. residents rejected central cities in favor of suburbs. Thus, parasitic urbanization became "an anomaly in the history of urban development in the United States" with a complex set of drivers, reverberating effects, and disastrous long-term consequences that we may be only beginning to realize (pp. 59-60).

Woven together in Beauregard's story are the motivations and impacts of urban renewal that destroyed established urban neighborhoods, and the interstate highway

system that bypassed them; the complicated relationships among public housing investment, mortgage programs, tax policy, and redlining practices; and initiatives to confront urban poverty and discrimination alongside supports for decentralization of households and businesses. More concretely, development beyond the urban edge crossed a line marked not by the density of dwellings, but “between acceptable profits and higher profits” (p. 97). A new frontier had been created with the promise of ever-increasing prosperity; and each decision in favor of the suburbs was a vote against the city and a dollar denied its coffers.

This fascination with the suburbs was also unambiguously a result of the threat posed to white Americans by the cities and their black inhabitants. As the civil rights movement gathered force and racial unrest grew in the 1960s, political forces grew against the cities. Democratic urban programs were demonized: “Associating the big, industrial cities with the Democrats, the New Deal, organized labor, and African Americans, Republicans and conservatives were disinclined toward them” (p. 82). Seen through black and white glasses, in the cities “blacks carried the burden of urban ills and whites kept their distance” (p. 87). This literally black and white view of urban decline tends to marginalize the role played by other biases, such as the sexism that changed women’s work, image, and family values in the suburbs (that Beauregard does tackle beginning on p. 126), or the preference for sedentary lifestyles that the suburbs facilitated, bringing about considerable research on the health consequences of the suburbs.[1] Immigration is mentioned as playing a small role in the Short American Century (immigration rates were comparatively low), but that role is not analyzed. Nor are drugs or crime noted as major problems of the city or its image, though discussions of bohemia, the ghetto, and the slum are evocatively considered.

Beauregard’s historical lens allows us to see the value that often was not recognized in the industrial cities. His view of this former urbanity borrows from Jane Jacobs and has to do with the generation and maintenance of something called (with numerous disclaimers and notes of irony) “community.” Because people in urban areas coexisted in close proximity, Beauregard states that tolerance was a must and “the combination of diversity and tolerance, in turn, created a level of civility that made ... urban neighborhoods places of ‘community’” (p. 134). Urban residential neighborhoods were racially and ethnically segregated, but they were nonetheless stable and pressed up against neighborhoods of other groups, enabling the construction of common and lasting commu-

nity identities within neighborhoods and tolerance for the diversity of others. These characteristics, Beauregard goes on to argue, were essential to the idea of urbanism in the United States and even to the creation of a great nation. It was the “bourgeois urbanity” of tolerance amid cosmopolitan diversity that bred civic responsibility and investment, leading to virtually all of the accomplishments, movements, ideas, and institutions that give pride to the nation. The cities were responsible for the cultural heritage of the nation’s “museums and galleries, symphonies and opera houses, botanical gardens and universities.” The city as crucible of diversity was also “the city as a place of opportunity, civic obligations, and cultural advancement” (p. 186).

The choice of the suburbs as the sites and the means of development after World War II did away with these characteristics. The suburbs served only a narrow range of incomes, segregated along class lines, and planted the seed of upward mobility as a desire that turned out to be more powerful than ethnic or community identity, and added moral as well as physical distance to the experience of diversity. In ironic summation: “Domestic prosperity and a global presence fed on the industrial cities, draining them of population and investment, weakening their governments, and consigning racial minorities and poor households to inner-city slums and chronic unemployment. In return for their contribution, the industrial cities were left with abandoned manufacturing zones, block after block of dilapidated housing, and blighted downtowns. The largest cities eventually became the shame of the nation, attended to when riots erupted but otherwise lamented and ignored” (p. 173). From all different directions and all manner of independent decisions, the cities were abandoned as the nation lost its understanding of why they ought to be saved. In the process, Beauregard barely hints, the nation may have lost its understanding of how to save itself.

The book is meticulously researched and footnoted, providing an indexed view into a major slice of American urban studies literature. Its eight chapters proceed through 360 degrees of examination of the Short American Century, beginning with broad-brush statistical trends regarding the history of traditional, distributive urbanization; moving to economic, governance, socio-cultural, domestic, and international contexts, and factors contributing to parasitic urbanization; and concluding with comments on American urban identities. It is written in the manner of a hand-stitched seam with enough backtracking and reiteration of statements, from a variety of different research perspectives and bodies

of evidence, to move the reader unflinchingly from skepticism to agreement as the chapters march on. This method makes for slow reading in the first three chapters, which doggedly build up the facts and figures on which the argument depends. It also obscures the full meaning of the author's key conceptual innovation: the difference between earlier "distributive urbanization" and postwar "parasitic urbanization," until a crystallizing explanation in chapter 4, near the book's halfway point.

While Beauregard's research has uncovered some remarkable statistical data on the massive losses suffered by industrial cities and the growth of the suburbs, it is in the latter part of the book that the story of parasitic urbanization becomes more complex, original, and compelling. The collapse of industrial cities is anchored in three major factors that "amplified [the] core logic" of parasitic urbanization: "the ambivalence toward cities that has prevailed since the country was first colonized, the reluctance of state and federal governments to regulate suburbanization and redirect development to faltering cities, and the lack of interest that investors and developers had in the city compared to their infatuation with the suburban frontier" (p. 71). These factors, compounded by the wealth to be gained from the work of urban demolition and from the very inefficiencies of suburban development, turned out to be irresistible in the rapidly expanding postwar economy.

Rich in historical detail, Beauregard's analysis takes no change for granted and stops short of offering any totalizing meta-narrative. His perspective is that "complex events are conjunctural," meaning contingent but not unavoidable (p. 60). In other words, there has been no concerted ideological effort to destroy traditional urbanization in the United States, but nearly everything that could turn against the cities did: "It was not just the automobile, a pro-growth governance regime, deteriorated city environments, racial tensions, the cessation of territorial expansion, the drop-off in immigration, or a diminution in the forces of agglomeration attendant to deindustrialization that produced parasitic urbanization, but all of them together and simultaneously" (p. 60). Although the specific causes of parasitic urbanization are elusive throughout the book, casting back for precedent-setting mistakes that may have been made and conditions that existed provides a well-contextualized understanding of this unique period in U.S.-and world-history.

While the uniqueness of the story of U.S. postwar urbanization provides sufficient reason for this book to be of value to international urban scholars, the book also

provides a more global comparative context than most American accounts. As the Short American Century is the quintessential period of American exceptionalism, this broad view comes unexpectedly. Beauregard recognizes the limits of American exceptionalist explanations and offers a survey of trends in parasitic urbanization concurrent in the developed world. He finds many of the trends comparable, but not their scale. Although he considers the roots of suburbanization in European new towns, he finds no sibling to American sprawl. And while American prosperity during the Short American Century is first and foremost a domestic matter, it had its international tentacles, driven in a major way by the Cold War, the Bretton Woods Agreement of 1944, and the Foreign Assistance Act of 1948, known as the Marshall Plan.

The insights offered in chapter 7, "America's Global Project," are particularly fascinating. The Cold War element of urban abandonment was deep, and included technical analyses of urban vulnerability to atomic bombing, suspicions of cities as harbors for Communist cells, and the shame of growing slums of low-income African Americans. Private homes became fortresses. Sparsely settled suburbs with functional zoning, drive-ins, and strip malls offered "good bomb immunity" (p. 150). The Marshall Plan, which included cultural and political as well as economic investments, to the tune of thirteen billion dollars from 1948-52, "gave substance to America's new internationalism" and enabled the United States to remake the European economy in its own image (p. 162). American cities had never been able to compete with their counterparts overseas, but the suburbs served "to shift the cultural scales so as to favor the United States" (p. 180). This process is exemplified through Beauregard's fascinating account of the "kitchen debate" between Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in July 1959. Taking place in a prefabricated model home that was part of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, the kitchen debate "asserted in a very public and global way the values of American-style democracy and capitalism against Soviet-style communism and economic planning. The debate was also crucial in crystallizing the importance of a suburban way of life—and domesticity—to the selling of the American standard of living" (p. 169).

While Beauregard himself does not take the argument as far, international urban researchers will also be provoked to consider the specific points of divergence between the different urbanization patterns in other countries of the West and those of the United States. The answers to this question lie in many areas, from national

politics and governance systems to industrial structure and pace of development, different race and cultural relations, and international relations, but Beauregard offers a higher-level answer. “After World War II, a contract of sorts was signed between capital and the government. In return for constant and rapid growth in the economy, the government would minimize the encroachment of the welfare state and its planning apparatus” (p. 90). This particularly American contract, in a sense, substituted economic performance for strong political ideology, including government investment in all forms of social provision, planning, and development controls. The growth of the welfare state in other countries, Beauregard acknowledges, did not “produce a desire for individual homes and automobiles, supermarkets, televisions, and the other accoutrements that were associated with American suburban living”—at least not at the same scale (p. 147). In time, perhaps, the gap between the business contract with the United States and that of other Western countries has shrunk. For this, too, the work conducted during the Short American Century takes credit, as a central goal of international policy at this time was convincing Japan and Europe “of the legitimacy of their [private, capitalist] desires and helping them to act accordingly” (p. 147). The suburban model, thus, happened in the United States more by accident than by “ideological imperative” and has since spread slowly but irrevocably (p. 147).

In a kind of “urbanist’s revenge” analysis, this depiction does turn the predominant view of cities as the engines of consumption and economic growth on its head, showing this view to be insufficiently differentiated in the space of the metropolitan area. In this way, consumption as a way of life can be seen as a suburban rather than a primarily urban phenomenon: “Higher rates of new development rather than redevelopment, higher incomes, and a more consumption-based lifestyle were the key to the suburbs’ economic impact” (p. 199). Beauregard also associates the personal neuroses, social, interpersonal, and political hardening and competitiveness, often considered to be afflictions of big cities, with the suburbs, where “social striving and the ‘fear of falling’ ... kept suburbanites from compassion and empathy for the poor” (p. 139). By the same token, it was also the move to the suburbs, not the earlier move to the industrial city, that set American families’ lives into perpetual motion on the social and corporate ladders.

*When America Became Suburban* is a persuasive lament for the decline of American industrial cities, “an event unprecedented in the country’s history [and] the

price America paid to be the most powerful and most affluent nation in the world” (p. 18). Beauregard documents the successive phases of affront suffered by these cities over these thirty years, from the loss of residents to the suburbs, to the loss of manufacturing firms and wholesalers, to the loss of office functions, to the final straw: “When professional sports teams began to build stadiums in the suburbs, all seemed lost” (p. 86). The book’s perspective is middle class in a broad sense—from the bourgeois intellectuals to the working classes, but with only a gesture to the poor and with the rich entirely ignored. Clearly, Beauregard’s is the view from the beleaguered metropolitan core. He is careful to point out, in describing the many, unstoppable forces of suburbanization, that all through this time, intellectuals and most public commentators continued to turn their noses up at the suburbs, the lifestyles they offered, and the pace of growth within and around them. “Suburbanites were joiners and not mavericks. They lived in identical houses on identical streets, bought identical cars, and were surrounded by people of the same age, race, and income. This conformity had its roots in an emerging mass society in which people allowed their personalities to be homogenized, their individuality to be erased, and their actions to be dictated by advertisers or political demagogues” (p. 138). In Beauregard’s analysis as well as his recollection, “no self-respecting intellectual, artist, or iconoclast would live in the suburbs” (p. 142). Beauregard’s quest is for urbanity, even as he comes close to acknowledging this quest is not or is no longer part of his country’s identity.

It is this tone of disappointed resignation that is, in the end, the most unsatisfying part of the book. In documenting this pivotal point in American urbanization, domestic and international identity, and global positioning and leadership, Beauregard stops short of considering what this means for the future of the metropolis, American and otherwise. His historical and urban focus prevents him from considering some of the points of intersection between his analysis and those of, for instance, global change studies that have arrived at similar conclusions—and used them to suggest future needs in research and policy. A number of indices, developed to improve on our dominant measures of progress, such as the Index of Social and Economic Welfare (ISEW) and the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI), also track the trends described by Beauregard as those of the Short American Century. To some scholars, the starting point of the Short American Century marks the beginning of the Great Acceleration, or the second stage of the Anthropocene, de-

defined as an epoch during which humans became a geophysical force. Far from a final look backward, this global change research provides a dire warning based on documentation of the high-consumption activities that Beaugregard covers from an urban development perspective. The extent to which these activities stress the biosphere indicates that this Great Acceleration cannot last much beyond 2010 or 2020.[2]

As global change research suffers from an incomplete understanding of the role of urbanization in economic growth, the shredding of the social contract, consumption and environmental degradation, and population trends, so does Beaugregard's analysis suffer from a failure to connect with work on global and future trends at the ecosystem or global scale. For a scholar who characterizes his interest as situated with "the fundamental relationships that constrain and direct developmental possibilities and thus with the broad trends of urban change," his blindness to scholarship on cities as complex adaptive systems in this context of global threats is damaging (p. 71).[3] Beaugregard's latest book provides significant ammunition for defenses against the many faces of anti-urbanism rampant in the global change, futures, sustainability, and international development literatures, if only he would take up this task and make these connections clear.

Has parasitic urbanization ended in the United States? In Beaugregard's mind, there are two sides to this story. On the one hand, parasitic urbanization as a means to American prosperity has been "dampened" by the recovery of economies in Western Europe and Japan, the

development of global manufacturing sectors in developing countries, and, perhaps, "the beginning of the decline of America itself" (pp. 108, 120). On the other hand, the acquisitive spirit and identity of parasitic urbanization has only intensified with the globalization of the city, such that cities themselves have become suburban, "a further dilution of the urban way of life of the early twentieth century" (p. 138). By either account, the future seems bleaker, and the loss of the historical city is bigger than we knew.

#### Notes

[1]. Howard Frumkin, Lawrence Frank and Richard Jackson, *Urban Sprawl and Public Health: Designing, Planning and Building for Healthy Communities* (Washington DC: Island Press, 2004).

[2]. Robert Costanza, Lisa J. Graumlich and W. L. Steffen, eds., *Sustainability or Collapse? An Integrated History and Future of People on Earth* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007); and W. L. Steffen, et al., *Global Change and the Earth System: A Planet under Pressure*, IGBP Global Change Series (New York: Springer-Verlag 2004).

[3]. Philip W. Anderson, Kenneth Joseph Arrow, and David Pines, eds., *The Economy as an Evolving Complex System* (Redwood City: Addison-Wesley, 1988); John H. Holland, *Hidden Order: How Adaptation Builds Complexity* (Redwood City: Addison-Wesley, 1996); and S. Levin, "Self-Organization and the Emergence of Complexity in Ecological Systems," *BioScience* 55, no. 12 (2005): 1075-1079.

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