One of the major trends in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century has been the development of suburbia and the tremendous population drain from cities to suburbs that accompanied it. The United States has, as a result, become a predominantly suburban nation: the 1992 presidential race was indeed dominated by the suburban vote (Dreier p. 80), and the suburban population is now greater than the combination of its urban and rural counterparts. Over the decades following World War II, not only has suburbia developed at an amazingly fast pace, but its face has changed as well. While early suburban developments were essentially residential places, “without economies of their own” (Kunstler p. 55), successive developments of commercial activities and other businesses have sprouted in the suburbs, which arguably became independent from the cities, to such an extent that Daniel Mandelker could go as far as to assert that “We do not need cities anymore” (Dreier p. 85). Similarly, the contemporary structure of households is far different than it used to be in a few decades ago – a phenomenon that, in turn, affects the nature of suburbia as a whole. What factors have driven the rapid shift towards suburban development, and should it be stopped, managed, or even reversed?

It appears that the suburbanization of America was spurred by a combination of various factors, and that this phenomenon has been so important as to redefine America’s identity and social structure – more often than not in undesirable ways. The main outcomes of the
suburbanization process are indeed a high environmental impact on the local and global scales, the crisis of cities, and reinforced social inequalities and segregation.

In *The European Dream*, economist Jeremy Rifkin analyzes the different spatial organizations in the United States and Western Europe and thereby attempts to provide an explanation of suburbanization based on cultural values. In Rifkin’s view, it is linked to the pioneer mindset, in which freedom has precedence over any other values and translates into private property. Americans are described as achieving freedom through owning their own private space. The need for these large private spaces in the American mentality, combined with the availability of cheap land, would have driven the expansion of suburbs and the migration out of crowded cities to low-density suburbs dominated by large private lots. This view tends to be confirmed by Kunstler, who depicts the earliest suburban developments as real estate ventures used by rich entrepreneurs to escape urban life, viewed as a hassle worse than that of commuting. The development of these early forms of suburbs was enabled by the expansion of railroad, which provided fast and easy access to the city, on which the first suburbs were economically dependent, having no economy of their own whatsoever. However, although the expansion of the railway certainly played a role in making suburbs viable, the bulk of the American suburban exile owes more to private vehicles than to public transportation; but while the boom in car ownership certainly was a necessary prerequisite for extensive suburbanization, it was not a sufficient condition.

This sufficient condition was created by the Federal Government itself, thanks, to a great extent, to the Federal Highway Act of 1956, which launched what would become the biggest public infrastructure project in the U.S. so far: the building of the interstate highway network, which would dramatically affect the patterns of development of urban areas in the U.S, which
became solely centered on private vehicle transportation. The highway infrastructure was not the only means by which the Federal government encouraged suburbanization; another significant part of its action took place on the fiscal and banking levels, as exemplified by the passing of the Internal Revenue Code in 1954, which created an accelerated depreciation system for new construction. With a 7 year depreciation period (instead of the former 40 year depreciation period), new construction on the cities’ fringes became attractive to business interests, who started to speculate on land value and engage into massive real estate developments, the demand for which was artificially increased by the Federal Housing Authority’s mortgage policies, starting in the 1930’s (Freund p. 15). These developments, supported by “professionals whose jobs depend upon growth” (Hayden p.16), were not necessarily well-planned, as activist Eben Fodor argues: “planners and members of the design professions have often chosen not to criticize their clients for fear of losing them” (ibid.), resulting in a lack of cohesion among new developments. The creation of sustainable communities or the promotion of certain standards of quality of life was, to a large extent, of no concern to those referred to by Logan and Molotch as “the growth coalition” (Logan & Molotch p. 467), whose self-interest constituted the prime motivation for their support of city growth through expansion. Urban growth was indeed not supported only by Federal policies, but by all those who profited from it – developers and realtors first come to mind, but the “growth coalition” also includes a larger part of the business community as well as local politicians.

Their consensus on the benefits of urban growth has generated expansion, characterized to a large extent by the boom of edge nodes besides that of residential suburbs. These suburban centers of office and retail space, where fast-food chains and big box retailers such as Wal-Mart thrive, became an essential component of the economic fabric of suburbs, which has developed
since the 1960’s, making suburbia increasingly independent from the central cities it surrounds, and generating fast-paced economic growth. Unfortunately, all did not profit from it, as central-city ethnic groups remained largely excluded from it (Wilson).

The suburbanization phenomenon has had such a tremendous impact on the U.S. society that most features of the latter can be traced back to it – that is, most characteristics of the contemporary U.S. society are direct outcomes of the trend towards suburbanization that developed over the last fifty years, or have been reinforced by it. The most striking of these outcomes is spatial segregation. This characteristic of the U.S. society certainly predates even the earliest suburban developments, but suburbanization has nonetheless played a key role in its increase to dramatic dimensions. Suburbanization and spatial segregation have indeed always been closely linked. Kunstler portrays the first suburban developments as resorts for the richest who wished to escape the discomfort associated with living in industrial cities, creating a first level of spatial segregation by income between those who can afford suburban living and those who remain trapped in the central city – based on the premise that the latter was not a desirable place to live. The second level of segregation by income exists between suburbs themselves. As Kunstler put it, “segregation by income would become a permanent feature of suburbia” (Kunstler p. 52). The increased segregation generated by suburbanization is not limited to class but also encompasses ethnic segregation. The latter was indeed increased with the trend towards suburbanization, partly because of redlining by banks and insurance companies, made explicitly legal by the FHA (Freund p.16), which however hid its discriminative policies under the mask of free market forces. Redlining refers to the exclusion of certain groups from access to property or insurance coverage in certain areas, officially to preserve their social homogeneity. Actually, this form of discrimination, practiced on an ethnic basis, aimed at preventing potential losses in
property value that may have been caused by ethnic diversity in areas where the latter is primarily seen as a source of tension and conflict likely to adversely affect property values. Besides this forced segregation, another, more spontaneous segregation phenomenon also occurs as new immigrants tend to cluster together in closed, ethnic suburban communities. Most new immigrants now move directly to the suburbs where they have relatives, so as to benefit from these connections they see it as the only way they can actively participate in the economy. This movement strengthens ethnic segregation.

Suburbanization also aggravates this segregation problem by diminishing the resources cities can allocate to social aid programs. The exile of citizens and businesses to suburbs has a significant impact on central cities’ tax bases, the shrinking of which leads to budget cuts in social aid programs, public transportation systems and public schools, as well as postponements of infrastructure investments such as sewer renovation, which will primarily affect the generally poor and dominantly black population of central cities. The lack of resources allocated to help these communities leaves cities with little power to face problems of crime, drug addiction and homelessness – situations that become so critical the idea that “cities cannot be saved” starts to surface, diminishing their political influence. Cities have also been hit by the development of malls and edge notes in low-density suburban areas just as hard as they have been by the shift in population. Indeed, the concentration of businesses in these locations, and particularly that of so-called “big box retailers” the likes of Wal-Mart, constituted a blow to the economies of central cities, as the competition of these new business centers drove a vast amount of local downtown shops and service providers out of business.

Issues of infrastructure do not only affect central city residents, but suburbanites as well. The ever-increasing sprawl of endless developments accessible only by car, with no public
transportation infrastructure, has led to problems of traffic congestion. Indeed, even though the suburbs do tend to have their own economic activity since the 1960’s, commuting, whether to the nearest downtown or to offices located in edge nodes, is still an essential part of suburban life. With an increasing amount of women joining the workforce, traffic has skyrocketed. Not only does this make life increasingly inconvenient for daily commuters, but it also has a tremendously severe impact on the environment. Air quality is indeed directly menaced by urban sprawl and the automobile traffic it entails – not to mention the long-term risk of global warming, to which the tons of greenhouse gases released daily by millions of private vehicles connecting residential suburbs to cities and workplaces contribute significantly, to such an extent that the U.S., while representing only 4% of the world’s population, account for almost 25% of GHG emissions worldwide.

Just as urban sprawl is totally unsustainable from an environmental standpoint, one may raise the question whether suburbs are socially sustainable. Without going back to the problem of spatial segregation and inequality, it seems that even socially homogeneous, relatively well-off or even rich suburbs may not quite be the safe havens of the American dream, and the ideal of suburban living may well be just that – an ideal rather than a reality. Kunstler points out that suburban development is far too rapid to allow the emergence of social institutions that can only, he asserts, develop over time. This lack of social institutions makes suburbs places to which people are very loosely attached if at all, and where the sense of community is kept to a minimum, a phenomenon dubbed a “decrease in social capital” by Putnam. Rather, suburban dwellers tend to live relatively isolated while suffering from the hassle of long-distance commuting, and therefore often do not consider their suburban communities as places to stay, but
rather as temporary stops, places to leave, as epitomized in the movie “Home Economy”, which even suggests conditions of life of some suburbanite families may even cause them to fall apart.

As a conclusion, the suburbanization of the U.S. was not entirely a spontaneous phenomenon. While American cultural values may have played a role in its development, it was actively promoted by the Federal government through transport infrastructure, credit and fiscal policies, as well as by a variety of business interests, from General Motors to realtors and utility companies. Suburbanization, while undeniably spurring economic growth, also had numerous adverse effects. The most striking of those is an increase in racial segregation and inequality. Segregation was accentuated by strong redlining, and inequality increased as a result of segregation, as only whites captured the tremendous economic growth generated by the expansion of suburbs. Suburbanization also entailed a crisis in cities, severely hurt by the shrinking of their tax base and thus lacking the resources to face the issues resulting of poverty and segregation. Ironically, whereas the first moves to suburban areas were fueled by the hope for a better quality of life, it is unclear whether suburbanization has achieved this goal, as the impact of sprawl on traffic and air quality, as well as its overall toll on the environment are extremely high - while numerous suburban areas are seen even by their residents as places to leave rather than places to live.

References


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