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The Struggle of Memory against Forgetting: Insurgent Histories and the Development of a New Suburban Praxis

By Chris Schildt

Abstract

In this paper, I revisit the popular history of race and class in the suburbs to show that poor communities and communities of color have played a pivotal role in shaping contemporary suburban landscapes, using eastern Contra Costa County as a revealing example. I then draw on Leonie Sandercock's concept of "insurgent historiographies" to argue that this insurgent history of the suburbs can and should redefine urban planning praxis today.

"The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations." — James Baldwin, Unnameable Objects, Unspeakable Crimes.

Introduction

Antioch, California, presents itself as a sleepy suburban community tucked away in the eastern corner of Contra Costa County in the San Francisco Bay Area. But in 2008, African American Section 8 recipients in Antioch brought a class action lawsuit against their city, claiming racial discrimination and harassment by the local police in a deliberate attempt to push African American families out of the city. The lawsuit brought national media attention as an example of the racial tensions that arise when poor, black households move from inner city neighborhoods to suburban communities (Moore 2008).

This event is understood within the context of a larger narrative of urban history in the United States. This old tale should be easy to follow: After World War II, white, middle class families left the cities *en masse* and moved to the suburbs, leaving behind the poor and ethnic minorities in inner city ghettos. Progressive historians like Kenneth Jackson provide an important contribution to this history by thoroughly documenting the ways in which federal housing policies, exclusionary zoning, and

restrictive housing covenants shaped the set of opportunities for poor communities and communities of color (1985). These histories articulate the structural factors behind the persistence of racial spatial segregation and class disparities in the United States.

In the last fifteen years, however, a new wave of urban historians have begun to record an insurgent history, one in which poor communities and communities of color have not just existed on the urban fringes but have played a pivotal role in shaping contemporary suburban landscapes.¹ Authors such as Richard Harris (1996), Robert Lewis (2004), Becky Nicolaidis (1999), and Andrew Wiese (2001) have shown how early working class and minority communities shaped the suburbs. I argue that this alternate suburban history of race and class can be an insurgent force, opening up new ways for urban planners to understand and therefore act in these suburban spaces. Differentiated suburban histories give us better insights into communities like Antioch, which have been profoundly shaped by these marginalized communities.

An Insurgent History of the Suburbs

Suburbs are a long-standing feature of American urban history. They have served as an urban frontier, where the lines blur between city and country. They are fractured landscapes of power, providing radical examples of local democratic control as well as federal government intervention and corporate capitalist activity. As peripheral spaces, suburbs have been the setting for a wide range of activities, from noxious industry to upper class residential enclaves to homesteading and semi-agricultural uses.

Several prominent themes emerge from the recent literature on race and class in suburban history that are particularly relevant here. First is the assertion of black and working class identity in segregated suburban spaces. Wiese describes how African Americans, particularly in the South, began moving to the urban fringes in the second half of the 19th century (2004). Often, these early black communities were unplanned, with no paved roads or services. They were located in marginal places, physically segregated from white neighborhoods by railroad tracks or other barriers. Yet these were also places where black identity could be asserted, where blacks lived beyond the “daily surveillance by whites” (Wiese 2004). African American churches, businesses, and universities would often locate near these older settlements, helping to maintain

1. It's important to note that much of this “new” history is based on older histories that document the long history of working class suburbs. See William Dobriner (1963) and Bennett Berger (1960) for two examples of these earlier insurgent histories.

black spatial identity even as growing city boundaries swallowed these neighborhoods and transformed them into what would be recognized today as inner-ring suburbs or outer-city neighborhoods.

A second theme centers on the diverse economic activities of early suburban residents. As Weise articulates, early working class suburban families drew their incomes from a variety of sources— wage work in nearby factories or in the homes of rich families in upper-class residential enclaves, or small-scale agricultural pursuits on their own land (2004). Wiese and many others have also documented how land use regulations and zoning were often used by whites to keep African American, Chinese, and other ethnic minority communities out, leaving residents of color with few choices but to move beyond the boundaries of a cities' exclusionary regulations, which often meant moving to areas with inferior services, higher costs, and overcrowded conditions (Wiese 2004).

Finally, it is important to recognize the persistence of low-income communities and communities of color in the suburbs in spite of dramatic forces to push them out. After World War II there was an explosion of planned, mass-produced suburbs in the United States, aided by the Federal Housing Act of 1934 and the G.I. Bill of 1944. Levittowns sprang up across the country on what were once potato farms and wheat fields. These communities inspired many of the first critiques of the suburbs, which targeted their unattractive form and cultural emptiness.² However, as William Dobriner and Bennett Berger has revealed, many of these histories and criticisms studied only a few suburbs at specific times (Dobriner 1963; Berger 1960). Dobriner shows that while a study of Levittown in 1958 may have shown it to be overwhelmingly white and middle class, ten years later it had diversified considerably, with more working class and immigrant families moving in.³ The median salaries of these working class households ranged from 130 percent to 160 percent of the newly-defined poverty threshold (1963).

The 1960s was the first decade in which the black population grew faster than the white population in the suburbs (Farley 1976); by the 1990s, the geography of race and class was shifting in dramatic ways. Many new immigrants, particularly Latinos and South and East Asians, were moving directly into the suburbs, bypassing the traditional ethnic enclaves in the cities. Deregulation of housing mortgages in the 1990s meant that many families that had previously been excluded from the housing market could now participate, albeit usually on unfavorable terms.

2. See for example, Lewis Mumford (1961) and Robert Fishman (1987).

3. Though to note, these immigrant families were mostly European, including Italian, Irish, and Russian.

At the same time, poverty was moving out of the inner city and shifting to the suburbs (Jargowsky 2003). By 2008, there were more people living in poverty in the suburbs than in the cities (Kneebone and Garr 2010). Media attention to this changing geography of poverty blames the foreclosure crisis and current economic recession for the rise in suburban poverty; indeed, as the recession unfolds, poverty continues to rise at a faster rate in the suburbs than in the cities.⁴ But suburban poverty is not a new phenomenon. Rather, the poor and working class were some of the first residents of the suburbs, and have played an important role in shaping the current metropolitan landscape.

East County's Contested History

As Richard Walker and Alex Schafran have written, the development of eastern Contra Costa County embodies many of the themes of the revisited suburban history discussed above. Beginning in the mid-19th century, East County's northern coastline was home to significant industrial development, supporting both San Francisco to the west and the gold rush activities to the east. East County's unique geographic characteristics—fresh delta water, deep natural ports, and nearby coal veins—as well as advantageous social and economic factors including cheap land, easy transportation routes, and a favorable business environment (a euphemism for anti-union), led to development of coal mining, canneries, and chemical, brick, and steel manufacturing (Vance 1964; Walker 2004; Schafran 2009).

This industrialization led to the establishment of working class and immigrant communities. Welsh migrants worked in the coal mines of the Black Diamond hills, while Italian immigrants established themselves as fishermen along the river. However, not all communities were equally welcomed. There is some documentation that Chinese immigrants were forcibly expelled from Antioch in the 1870s.⁵

During World War II, war-related activities stimulated the economy and changed the local demographics. Wartime housing demand resulted in a glut of poorly constructed homes on unincorporated county land that provided an important entry point for new poor and working-class families to gain access to jobs on the nearby army base. Filipino and African American workers on the Camp Stoneman Army Base stayed after the war to work in nearby industry jobs and bought houses in Pittsburg and Bay Point, communities that neighbor Antioch. By the time the base closed in 1954, a well-established population had already settled

4. US Census 2010.

5. See Loewen's website for some admittedly weak data of Antioch as a "sundown town" in the late 19th century: <http://sundown.afro.illinois.edu>.

in the area. Antioch, however, was well-known for its unwelcoming attitude towards racial minorities; it took another three decades for non-white communities to gain entry. Older African American and Latinos from Pittsburg recall Antioch's borders as boundaries that were not to be crossed.⁶ According to the US Census, by 1970, nearly forty percent of the population in Pittsburg was either African American or Latino, while in Antioch these two groups totaled less than two percent.

In the 1980s, the economic explosion of the San Francisco Bay Area had reached East County, and it became integrated into the larger metropolitan economy as a "drive 'till you qualify" bedroom community.⁷ Antioch today has a population of over 100,000, 80 percent of whom commute to Oakland or other larger nearby cities for work. A significant number of these new residents are African American and Latino – combined, these two groups comprised over 48 percent of the city's population in 2010.⁸ In Pittsburg, these two groups today make up nearly 60 percent of the population. According to an early African American pioneer, many of his friends and family moved to Antioch in the 1980s and 1990s in order to get away from failing neighborhoods in Oakland and Richmond. They established the first African American church there in 1995.⁹

As Schafran has documented, African Americans and Latinos paid a heavy price to move into the area (2009). Though homes in East County were cheaper than areas closer to the urban core, ethnic minorities in general received less favorable terms on mortgages than their white counterparts (Schafran 2009).¹⁰ Since 2007, the foreclosure crisis has hit East County hard. Indeed, Antioch has become infamous in national media as one of the several foreclosure epicenters in the country. Not surprisingly, the minority groups that received the worst loan terms in the height of the housing boom have been some of those hit first and worst by the crisis.

Defining a New Suburban Praxis

In her introduction to *Making the Invisible Visible*, Sandercock describes how the history of city planning suffers from representations of planning as a totalizing force. I would posit that her description of urban planning

6. Much of this history is based on author interviews conducted from September through December of 2010.

7. "Drive 'till you qualify" is used to describe how homes at a distance from urban centers are less expensive than those within cities; prospective buyers are therefore more likely to qualify for a home mortgage the further away from the center they drive.

8. US Census 2010.

9. Author interview, December 2010.

10. See also Alicia Munnell et al. (1996) and Elvin Wyly et al. (2009) for a larger discussion on racial disparities in home mortgage terms.

history is equally applicable to the planner's treatment of the development of the suburbs:

The novelist Milan Kundera has said that the struggle of people against power is a struggle of memory against forgetting... For historians, the struggle of particular memories against particular omissions or suppressions also involves power. Stories about the past have power and bestow power (Sandercock 1998).

I find this quote particularly compelling in light of my own experiences in East County. From 2007 to 2010, I worked with community leaders in Pittsburg and Antioch as a regional advocate for equitable development near a planned mass transit expansion. What I was struck with in my experiences in East County is that it did not fit any of the narratives I had been taught. I made several embarrassing errors in my early days of working there, often showing my clear surprise to learn that the families I worked with had lived there for decades and had roots as deep as many of the white families that held positions of power and influence in town. The more stories I heard, the more I saw that the myth of the white suburb was being used in these communities to disempower African-American, Latino, and Filipino communities by rendering their histories invisible.

So how might this revisit of suburban history defamiliarize old (mis) conceptions and open up new pathways for the urban planner to better understand and therefore act in these differentiated suburban spaces? I propose it does so in several ways:

First, it gives us the opportunity to inherit a new history. As Wiese writes, "historians have done a better job excluding African Americans from the suburbs than even white suburbanites" (2004). To write these stories out of history would be an injustice to those who struggled to establish themselves against forces of racism, discrimination, and official policies that attempted to lock them out.

Second, this history re-centers our stories on new actors; we read the poor and people of color as active participants in shaping the development of the suburbs. This changes the questions we ask. With regards to the African American Section 8 recipients in Antioch, for example, the question now shifts from "how does a white suburban community cope with the influx of poor inner city blacks?" to "how have people of color and low-income families asserted their political identity and rights in East County, and how has Antioch responded to such assertions over time?"

Finally, this insurgent history helps us define a better planning praxis. By repositioning ourselves within history, planners can assert counter-hegemonies within planning itself. James Holston shows how poor

communities on the urban fringes of Brazil have created an insurgent citizenship (1998); I propose that we planners can also benefit from understanding the ways low-income communities and communities of color in the United States have acted against the policies our professional predecessors have imposed on them. For example, Latinos and African American homeowners in Antioch have been organizing to stop banks from foreclosing on their homes. This David and Goliath story of small community against transnational financial corporations is also an assertion of identity and visibility in a city that has long treated these communities as invisible and undesirable. According to one community leader, this fight is a part of a much larger struggle for both African Americans and Latinos to maintain a presence in Antioch against forces that for decades have tried to keep them out.¹¹ Out of this moment of crisis a new black and brown sense of ownership and leadership is emerging. And it is coming from the suburbs.

I witnessed inspiring acts of struggle and survival in East County: a family who lost their home to the bank, and yet continued to fight against the bank foreclosing on a neighbor's home; a Spanish-speaking woman who was told that she had to speak only English at a city-run meeting, and yet said her comments anyway; an individual trying to keep up on her house payments by opening a hair salon in her garage; day laborers who struggled for months to get a port-a-potty installed near the Home Depot so they could use the bathroom in peace while soliciting work. These snapshots reveal the strength and tenacity of residents I met and worked with. Through both private and collective action, they were asserting that they, too, had a right to the suburbs.

This essay is a call to action, a challenge to all planners to develop a new planning praxis for the suburbs. Planning history must be broad enough to encompass low-income and ethnic suburbs that have fought for decades to be seen and heard; planning theories must place these historically forgotten communities centrally in understanding how the suburbs developed; and planning practice must be in solidarity with the struggles these communities face today.

As the opening quote from James Baldwin describes, our histories—both experienced and inherited—shape our realities. Adopting a new insurgent history of the suburbs to defamiliarize the old brings a radical potential to create new spaces for urban planning thought and practice. History is a powerful actor in shaping our tools and responses to problems. By adopting new histories, we inherit a new legacy and framework within which to develop a new planning praxis.

11. Author interview, December 2010.

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