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Beyond Sprawl and Anti-Sprawl

Thad Williamson

The widespread acceptance of the term *suburban sprawl* stands as a major rhetorical victory for critics of the land-use, transportation, and growth patterns characteristic of metropolitan America. As both friends and critics of suburbia have noted, the term *sprawl* itself has an almost inescapably pejorative connotation (Gordon and Richardson 1997; O’Flaherty 2005). Despite the best efforts of numerous academics to define the term with rigor and precision, what comes to mind first for most people on hearing the term is not some scholar or another’s strategy for defining and measuring sprawl, but rather an image of something unpleasant—a particularly ugly strip mall, a suburban traffic jam, a cookie-cutter development on previously green space. The idea that “sprawl” is a “bad thing” that we should do something about is not a hard sell in the popular press or among the general public. Indeed, the notion that sprawl is vastly inefficient, grossly inequitable, destructive of the environment, hostile to community, and ugly to boot, has frequently been taken by scholars and other observers as a self-evident truth.

Some of those claims (suitably refined) indeed can be supported by persuasive empirical evidence. But the overconfidence of sprawl’s critics has left the door open to a persistent counter-critique of conventional anti-sprawl wisdom, a counter-critique that remains a minority view among urban scholars but nonetheless carries quite substantial political significance. This counter-critique holds that sprawl is mostly a benign development resulting from America’s growing affluence, and that we should be wary of grand schemes to replace sprawl with the designs of professional planners.

It may be tempting to believe that these defenders of sprawl can be safely ignored by respectable scholars, in the same way that mainstream climate scientists now dismiss or simply ignore the tiny handful of professional scientists who reject or question the mainstream consensus about the reality

of global climate change. That would be an improper diagnosis, however, for two reasons. First, some of the relevant facts do—at least at a surface level—support the case of defenders of sprawling development. Second, the arguments of sprawl’s defenders are, to a significant degree, value-based arguments—that is, arguments that presume a larger normative framework and a larger sense of what the purpose of political life should be. These arguments are ideological (in the nonpejorative sense), not simply claims about facts. Persuasively answering those pro-sprawl arguments thus requires not simply marshalling relevant data but attending to and engaging with the values and normative frameworks to which the defense of sprawl appeals.

This chapter argues that mounting a persuasive critique of sprawling patterns of development in the United States requires explicit attention to and articulation of normative values—that is, the question of what would make for a good and just metropolis. In the course of this argument I challenge three kinds of urban orthodoxies: first, the conventional view that sprawl is obviously and self-evidently irrational and undesirable; second, the counter-orthodox view that sprawl is simply the product of consumer preferences and hence unassailable; and third, the view that it is possible to have substantive debates about larger-order policy questions while setting to the side normative concerns. On the contrary, what one thinks about sprawl will largely depend on what purposes one thinks political life in general and metropolitan institutional and spatial arrangements in particular should advance.

In the final part of the chapter, I take up the question of what might or should be done about sprawl. Here I argue that libertarian assessments of sprawl make a valid point—serious efforts to reverse sprawl will require challenging market-based land-use decision making in fundamental ways. Altering what is most problematic about sprawl will thus require more fundamental challenges to capitalism than mainstream analyses usually suggest.

The Libertarian Defense of Sprawl: Empirical Frameworks

For the purposes of this chapter, I define *sprawl* as a pattern of urban development in which growth is disproportionately channeled into low-density, automobile-oriented developments on the fringe of metropolitan areas. The most eloquent statements of the libertarian defense of sprawl to date can be found in architecture historian Robert Bruegmann’s book *Sprawl: A Compact History*, as well as in the collected works of policy scholars Peter Gordon and Harry Richardson. Bruegmann as well as Gordon and Richardson characteristically are engaged in (a) making claims about the way “sprawl” is defined and measured, (b) making empirical claims intended to counter common criticisms of sprawl, (c) offering critical observations about the

most prominent alternative to sprawl, New Urbanism, and (d) forwarding an alternative normative framework for understanding sprawl.

Some of the points these writers make about the vagueness of sprawl in popular discourse and also about the limited ability of New Urbanism to achieve its stated goals are quite well founded. For instance, building new pedestrian-oriented suburban developments in which everyone still uses a car to drive to their out-of-town job may yield a modest improvement on the suburban status quo, but it does little to alter the fundamental process of car-driven suburbanization (Gordon and Richardson 2001). Likewise, there is good reason to think that Bruegmann and like-minded writers are correct or largely correct about one important empirical claim—namely, that suburban lifestyles do in fact satisfy the preferences of many millions of Americans and that along several different dimensions, suburban neighborhoods designed around the automobile do offer a higher quality of life to its residents than is available elsewhere in the American metropolis. In my own research analyzing the 2000 Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey of more than 29,000 Americans, I find that residence in a low-density census tract that is recently built and that is highly dependent on automobiles is associated with higher, not lower, quality-of-life evaluations of one's local neighborhood, and with higher rather than lower trust of one's neighbors, even controlling for a range of other demographic factors at the individual and community levels (Williamson 2010; see also Oliver 2003).¹

The question, then, becomes what to make of this "inconvenient fact." This is where paying close attention to the normative framework offered by sprawl's defenders is of crucial importance. Bruegmann, for instance, uses the language of privacy, choice, and mobility both to explain the attractions of sprawl and as a normative justification for sprawl (Bruegmann 2005).

No one is against privacy, choice, and mobility as such, but much depends on both how these terms are understood and whether they are seen as the most important or even the only relevant values in assessing metropolitan development (L. King 2004). Implicit in Bruegmann's book is a commitment to a form of libertarianism that questions all efforts to use the powers of the state to advance the public interest and that defines privacy, choice, and mobility as the ability of individuals to satisfy their existing preferences to the best of their ability given the resources they possess.

What is implicit in Bruegmann becomes explicit in the work of Gordon and Richardson. Gordon and Richardson embrace the image of the "voluntary city," a form of urban life characterized by voluntary actions taken by individuals, firms, and nonprofit organizations (Beito, et al. 2002). This image of the voluntary city is coupled with a Hayekian defense of free-market capitalism (Gordon and Richardson 1999). The core idea here is that spontaneous, unplanned orders that are the product of multiple

intelligences using local knowledge are morally superior and more efficacious than attempts at deliberate planning carried out by public officials. Gordon and Richardson further claim that existing forms of suburbanization represent by-and-large the free play of market forces; sprawl is the spontaneous result of a postindustrial, low-transportation cost age. Those market forces and the choices they make should command respect: “[T]hat suburbanization itself should be an object of attack is amazing, given the expressed preferences of the majority of Americans for suburban lifestyles and the supposed sanctity of consumer sovereignty” (Gordon and Richardson 1997, 99).

Would-be critics of sprawl can respond to these libertarian arguments in at least three ways. The first is to challenge specific empirical claims scholars make about sprawl, or to challenge the conceptual understanding of sprawl they employ. In a useful review essay, Michael Lewyn (2006) persuasively critiqued the way Bruegmann advances his claims that sprawl is ubiquitous, that government policies have not played an important role in its development, that sprawl does not contribute to problems such as air pollution and congestion, and that sprawl is mostly attacked by “elites,” not ordinary (car-driving) Americans. Similarly, Reid Ewing’s (1997) response to Gordon and Richardson’s famous 1997 essay defending sprawl in the *Journal of the American Planning Association* takes issue with a number of their specific empirical claims (i.e., the claim that urban form does not affect vehicle miles traveled), as well as with their conceptualization of both sprawl and “compact development.”

A second type of response focuses less on the details of how to define sprawl and its relationship to specific problems, and more on the broad explanatory theories and view of the world invoked by sprawl’s libertarian defenders. In general terms, these writers employ a sharp opposition between the “market” and government action, representing choices in the market as the natural (and unimprovable) result of autonomous consumer preferences. Consider the claim made by Bruegmann as well as by economists like Jan Brueckner that a primary cause of sprawl is rising affluence (Brueckner 2000; Bruegmann 2005; Gordon and Richardson 2001). At times this claim is presented in the form of a logical fallacy: Sprawl is the product of rising affluence, and rising affluence is a Good Thing, therefore sprawl is a Good Thing. Such logic relies on the assumption that rising affluence has only beneficial consequences. More importantly, it portrays the link between affluence and sprawl as *inevitable*—but this is not the case. Rising affluence over time could have led American society to make dramatic public investments in improving central city neighborhoods, in transportation infrastructure within central cities and older neighborhoods, in parks and other public spaces within cities, and in intra-city rail transportation, all of which likely would have affected the growth patterns our metropolitan areas have taken. That income growth instead was consumed in the form of dramatic increases in

the average size of new homes reflects both the imbalanced prioritization of private over public goods characteristic of the U.S. political economy, as well as the hugely inequitable shape of income growth since the 1970s (Bartels 2008; Frank 2007), not a historic inevitability.

The possibility that rising economic growth might translate into better, more generous provision of public goods simply does not occur to most libertarians. To see why, we need to examine how libertarians conceptualize the relationship between the market and government. In the libertarian view, the market is the default norm for allocating goods and resources, including land, and the government is generally a distorting influence, except to correct specific examples of “market failure.” An alternative view is that government helps *constitute* markets, in both general and specific ways. In general terms, government defines property rights and enforces them, making market economies possible; in specific terms, the *way* governments adjudicate rights claims, provide public goods, and otherwise regulate market activities all *shape* markets and consumer preferences (Murphy and Nagel 2002). As an empirical phenomenon, the public plays a large role in all capitalist economies, particularly in shaping land and housing markets and in enabling local economic development. Of particular relevance to the sprawl case, local exclusionary zoning policies have deliberately constrained the market, exacerbating sprawl (Levine 2006; Ihlanfeldt 2006; Pendall, et al. 2005); similarly federal government policy beginning in the 1930s literally created the modern housing market by providing insurance guarantees on new mortgages (Freund 2006). Consequently, it is misleading if not nonsensical to maintain a sharp opposition between markets and government; governments constitute markets in indelible ways, and modern capitalist economies are characterized by the intertwining of public and private actors.

It is possible, then, to critique both the specific details and the broader empirical lens of sprawl’s libertarian defenders. Both sorts of responses are important, but from the standpoint of the libertarian writers, they are not decisive. For instance, it is possible, as some libertarian writers have, to recast local exclusionary zoning powers as a morally defensible “collective property right” (Nelson 2005). As for government policies that have contributed to sprawl, Bruegmann (2005) shrewdly notes that those government policies did not come out of the blue but often reflected existing market trends; to this we may add that such policies have often been popular (see Spinner-Halev Chapter 7, this volume). More broadly, even if sprawl generates more social costs than libertarians admit, and even if sprawl is not really the product of a free market, it may still be a defensible, even laudable, form of development if it really does deliver the goods of privacy, choice, and mobility—if we agree that those are the most important goods we should care about. Consequently, although discussion of specific empirical issues related to

what sprawl is, what causes it, and what its effects are is surely important, the argument between critics and defenders of sprawl is most fundamentally about values, not facts.

The Libertarian Defense of Sprawl: Normative Underpinnings

A more persuasive critique of the libertarian line on sprawl thus must go beyond empirical objections, and tackle the underlying premise that satisfaction of individuals' existing preferences and respect for "consumer sovereignty" should be the standard for evaluating public policy. This premise is shared not just by libertarian writers favoring sprawl but also by many economists. On this view, any case for regulating sprawl must rest on identifying either a market failure or an inefficient policy that can be corrected, leading to a potential Pareto improvement; such corrections do not challenge consumers' preferences, but rather satisfy them more efficiently (Brueckner 2000; O'Flaherty 2005).

Some libertarian writers go still further and suggest that more than just utility maximization is at stake in making respect for existing preferences the benchmark for evaluating policies. These libertarians regard the ability to choose as *inherently* valuable, independent of whether or not such choices enhance utility, and (in the strongest cases) may reject policy interventions designed to promote utility as a violation of property rights (Bellamy 2000; Marglin 2008). Gordon and Richardson (2001, 149) thus confidently declare that: "The sprawl debate, at its most fundamental level, hinges on whether one believes that people have the right to choose where they want to live, what they want to drive, where they want to shop. . . ." In short, libertarians offer both *utility-based* and *rights-based* arguments on behalf of sprawl, sometimes supplemented by an appeal to *democratic* rights of self-determination (e.g., the argument that pro-sprawl public policies historically enjoyed majoritarian support). Those who reject the notion that satisfaction of existing preferences should be the normative standard by which we judge policies or institutions thus must offer replies to all three arguments.

The notion that utility is always best maximized by acting on existing preferences is perhaps the easiest to challenge, as utilitarian philosopher Robert Goodin (1982, 1995, 2004) has shown. First, some preferences may simply be asocial or plainly antidemocratic in character. Second, individuals may have both higher-order and lower-order preferences, and satisfying the higher-order preferences may require restraining lower-order preferences (Goodin 1995). Third, individuals' existing preferences are strongly shaped by the nature of the choices before them (Elster 1985). If cities are dysfunctional,

crime-ridden, and have bad schools, it is not surprising that many rational people prefer suburbia (Ryan 1998).

What about the argument from democracy invoked by Bruegmann? Preference satisfaction is rejected as a normative standard by contemporary democratic theorists working in the deliberative tradition, precisely because making preference satisfaction the measure of political health completely cuts out the possibility of public deliberation about the ends we should pursue as a self-governing people (Goodin 2004; Richardson 2002; Young 2000). The notion that democracy involves a process of reasoning together about both our shared ends and the best means to achieve those ends, not simply the aggregation of majoritarian preferences, thus represents a fourth reason to reject the standard of preference satisfaction. Conceiving democracy as a mechanism for aggregating preferences leaves no place for a civic conversation in which views are exchanged, self-interest broadened, a sense of the public interest formed. Indeed, the libertarian version of preference satisfaction, in its most radical form, leaves no room for a concept of the public interest at all. Although libertarians do recognize the existence and importance of public goods, these goods are conceived of as essentially commodities we purchase through our moving decisions, not themselves the subject of democratic contention (Tiebout 1956).

Are these writers right? Why should the shape of our built environment be a matter of shared concern, and hence an object of democratic deliberation? The most powerful available answer to that question is the claim that fundamental questions of social justice are implicated in how we organize space, how we distribute people within space, and how we attach political institutions to space. Contrary to the rhetoric of some New Urbanists, this does not necessarily mean that the micro-details of neighborhood design have decisive effects on social justice. It does mean that social-spatial arrangements that have the effect of reinforcing an unjust social structure should be critically scrutinized and subject to democratic correction.

This leads us to a fifth reason for rejecting the satisfaction of existing preferences as the standard for evaluating policy: namely, that from the standpoint of social justice, no one has the right to fulfill preferences that are themselves contrary to the maintenance of just institutions. The rejection of existing preference satisfaction as a moral standard is a foundational move in liberal egalitarian theories of justice such as that of John Rawls (1999 [1971], 2001). The Rawlsian paradigm places under suspicion talk of privacy, mobility, choice, particularly when such goods are unequally distributed; from the Rawlsian standpoint, "choice" to live in a neighborhood divorced from the social problems that afflict other neighborhoods is in fact a matter of class (and often race) privilege, not a fundamental right or liberty.

Libertarian defenders of sprawl have offered two kinds of responses to social justice critiques of sprawl. The first is to challenge or deny the claim that there are significant social justice implications resulting from sprawl. Writers like Bruegmann acknowledge that concentrated poverty and bad urban schools are problems, but the apparent belief is that these are *sui generis* phenomena whose existence is fundamentally unrelated to the existence of prosperous majority White suburbs. That contention is plainly ahistorical (Kruse 2005; Lassiter 2006), although there is a reasonable debate to be had concerning the degree to which sprawling design itself (as opposed to patterns of social and economic segregation) contributes to city-suburb disparities. At a minimum, however, few scholars contest the observation that metropolitan areas in which cars are required to get around and jobs are far-flung disadvantage poor people (Frug 1999; Glaeser and Kahn 2004; Stoll 2007). Nonetheless, Gordon and Richardson (1997) argued that if equity is a concern, land-use policies are a weak lever for redressing inequities compared to strategies focused on income redistribution.

Libertarians' second response to the social justice critique of sprawl is to assert (or assume) that the spatial segregation of residents, by class if not race, is morally legitimate. For these writers, the fact that the relatively affluent seek to live in exclusive enclaves, and that middle- and working-class households settle in suburbs to improve their quality of life by escaping poverty and inner-city social problems, is not evidence of an unjust social structure. On the contrary, it is evidence of both the real gains suburbanization has produced in allowing non-elites to access the American dream of homeownership in a safe neighborhood with decent public institutions (as emphasized by Bruegmann), and it is a reflection of Americans' fundamental *right* to live where they wish.

If one instead begins with the premise that a just society must provide substantively equal life opportunities to all its members, regardless of where they live, one necessarily will ask different questions about our dominant form of metropolitan development. From the standpoint of a Rawlsian theory of social justice, in examining the sprawling metropolis we need to consider not only how inequalities are embedded in spatial arrangements, but also how such spatial arrangements impact the formation of the kinds of social solidarity needed to sustain a just society (see Goetz and Chapple Chapter 10, this volume). In this vein, critics of suburbanization have mounted a deep critique of socioeconomic inequalities, especially as embedded in the disparate quality of neighborhood public schools, inequalities that are not necessarily caused by spatial arrangements but are enacted through them. Here the work of the authors of *Place Matters*, political scientist Eric Oliver, and legal scholars Gerald Frug and John Powell are particularly notable (Dreier, et al. 2001; Frug 1999, 2006; Oliver 2001; J. Powell 2007). (It is

telling that Bruegmann cites none of these authors in his book.) The argument of these and related authors is that sprawl has become the vehicle by which fundamental inequalities of both opportunity and life outcomes have become institutionalized in American life. When income groups are allowed to self-segregate into distinctive communities and form autonomous local governments, then use those local powers both to (a) provide superior public goods to its residents and (b) exclude others from accessing such goods through exclusionary zoning (be it *de jure* or *de facto*), the result is an inequality machine, in which it is predictable that those born in middle-class and affluent suburbs will have dramatically better life chances than those growing up in struggling urban neighborhoods.

To be sure, taking the question of what social justice requires as the starting point for analyzing development patterns is unlikely to lead us to be highly preoccupied with the fine details of neighborhood design. Pursuing that question, however, also cannot lead to the conclusion that automobile-oriented sprawling development is a good thing, just because it seems to satisfy many people's preferences. A social institution can do a fine job satisfying some people's, even a majority's, preferences, at the same time that it denies to others the prerequisites of a decent life; such institutions are properly called unjust (see Spinner-Halev Chapter 7, this volume). Rawlsian liberal egalitarians might find reasons to like aspects of sprawl—it certainly is not the worst imaginable socio-spatial structure from the standpoint of justice—but they cannot ratify it simply on the grounds that it satisfies the preferences of a large number of people, even a majority.

Libertarians might respond that whatever the value of Rawls's philosophical apparatus, we should not be in the business of trumping individual rights in the name of some philosophical conception of justice, especially when that conception is politically controversial. Moreover, what if democratic majorities, on reflection, reject Rawlsian principles of justice?

That is an important question. Rawls's ideas about the importance and priority of a structure of basic liberties (including a democratic political structure) do indeed have wide resonance with U.S. political culture (although Rawls's liberties are very different from libertarian conceptions of freedom). On the other hand, the stringently egalitarian difference principle limiting inequalities to those benefiting the least well off is largely rejected by dominant strains of popular thinking about distributive justice, which generally insist there should be some relationship between individual effort or merit and economic reward (Chambers 2006; Hochschild 1981; Miller 1999).

Setting the difference principle to the side, the contested middle ground is the question of what "equal opportunity" means. The idea of equal opportunity has wide appeal in U.S. political culture. But Rawls' conception of equal opportunity is much more demanding than the everyday definition.

For Rawls, substantive equal opportunity means that initial starting positions should not materially impact one's prospects for getting ahead in life or attaining to positions. In contrast, in common usage "equal opportunity" often means meritocracy: everyone should have an "equal" chance to apply for colleges, jobs, and so forth, but the most talented and accomplished deserve to be picked, even if it turns out the "talented and accomplished" overwhelmingly grew up in affluent suburban environments as opposed to being products of urban public schools (Guinier 2006).

Indeed, the popular view is that it is morally acceptable, indeed commendable, for families to strive to be able to earn enough income to be able to live in a good neighborhood with a better-than-average public school, so as to be able to give one's children a better-than-average chance of getting ahead (Cashin 2007). Libertarian defenders appeal to and build on this popular view by further arguing that it would be *unfair* and a violation of liberty to "penalize" "successful" households by asking them to pay more taxes to help schools in worse-off neighborhoods. Implicit in this understanding is the assumption that local public goods are also *positional* goods (Hirsch 1976): that is, that some neighborhoods have superior public goods than others, and that the distribution of positions in these privileged neighborhoods should be allocated to those most willing to pay through the market.

Treating essential public goods as positional goods is antithetical to the program not only of Rawlsian liberal egalitarianism but also of any conception of distributive justice that insists that even if we allow other kinds of inequalities, those goods that are provided by the public should be provided equally to all (Walzer 1983). Libertarian writers about sprawl take this understanding of public goods as positional goods as given and unproblematic, however. They prioritize the ability of income groups to live where they choose as a fundamental right, and endorse the right of such groups to exercise local power in order to maintain a privileged position, on grounds of local self-determination. That prioritizing those "rights" inevitably leads to the inequitable distribution of public goods and life opportunities is simply a fact of the world that we should accept (and perhaps correct through national-level redistributive policies).

This is clearly a matter of philosophical disagreement with profound political significance, and it is precisely on this point that advocates of even minimal distributive justice should wage battle with defenders of the status quo.² Why should those who are already relatively well off (based on private incomes) also enjoy a superior allocation of public goods as well? The value of beginning an analysis of suburban sprawl from an explicit conception of social justice is that it forces libertarian and other defenders of the status quo to answer *that* question.

But just asking that question is not enough. Libertarians (in my view) do not have a good philosophical reply to it, but political scientists and others who study real-world political phenomena might have a good *explanation* for why so many Americans are quite comfortable commanding both above-average incomes and also a better-than-average bundle of public goods (and claiming it's fair). This explanation consists in the fact that Americans (implicitly or explicitly) recognize that they live in a class society, and do not think that the pursuit of economic and social advancement should be (or in fact is) restrained by any requirement that other people's children be afforded the same opportunity as their own. Rather than (like Rawls) conceiving of a society as a fair system of cooperation in which we strive to realize the good of justice together, providing the basis of self-respect to everyone, the more common American view is to treat society (and life itself) as a game in which individuals should strive to do as well for themselves (and their families) as possible, within the rules of the game.

To say this is not simply to say that America does not presently realize Rawlsian principles of justice, but also to suggest that Rawlsian theory itself, and related "ideal theories" of justice, are limited in their capacity to inform understanding of and engagement with sprawl, inequality, and other pressing metropolitan problems. Political life in the United States is not characterized by citizens and policymakers aiming to realize fair principles of justice; it is characterized instead by actions and conflicts involving self-interested actors who under certain circumstances might be able to see beyond their own good to the good of the whole, but who rarely if ever will agree to give up their own privileges and relative advantages voluntarily. The American political regime as presently constituted is not capable of enacting anything like the redistribution of assets and "primary goods" Rawls thought would be necessary to realize a just society; indeed, suburbanization itself appears to have contributed substantially to the formation of a conservative political culture in the United States (Gainsborough 2001; Williamson 2008). To understand why, we need to leave the world of ideal theory exemplified by Rawls.

Sprawl and the American Civic Regime

To analyze sprawl and other metropolitan problems through the lens of social justice, we need to consult not just ideal normative theories of justice but also somewhat more pragmatic accounts of how a just democratic political regime could work in practice, given the reality of social classes, powerful business interests and self-interested political actors. How can a measure of justice and freedom be realized in a world of contesting social forces, in

which there are continual tensions between public and private interests? This is the set of concerns traditionally associated with the republican tradition in political thought. Small “r” republicans ask how the various motivations citizens bring to political life might be harnessed so as to make realization of a politics based on advancing the common good possible (Elkin 2006; P. Pettit 1998). One central way this might take place is through citizen’s motivations becoming at least somewhat less base and somewhat more considerate of the concerns of other citizens. That in turn requires engagement and participation in local political life, including engagement across (especially) class and race divisions.

Following this train of thought leads us to ask another set of questions about the organization of our metropolitan areas: not just whether they are just or fair, but whether they are consistent with and contribute to a robust practice of democracy in which citizens are regularly engaged in politics, thereby both helping shape the conditions that affect their own lives and becoming skilled in judging and advancing a common public interest. Asking this question, again, is very different from simply asking whether existing patterns satisfy preferences in a relatively efficient way, or whether they enhance privacy, mobility, and choice. And as in the case of justice, posing this question is likely to lead one to take a much more critical view of America’s dominant pattern of metropolitan development (Williamson 2010).

Consider the finding noted earlier that residents of relatively sprawling neighborhoods report substantially higher levels of satisfaction than residents of traditional urban neighborhoods. This finding might be interpreted as a vindication of suburban life, but it also might be interpreted as an indictment of the American metropolis. In a metropolis where everyone has freedom and resources to move to whichever kind of neighborhood they prefer, satisfaction across neighborhoods should converge, as residents sort themselves out into their preferred environments. The existence of large, systematic gaps in neighborhood quality that are not reducible to differences in household incomes indicates that the American metropolis does not, in fact, satisfy everyone’s preferences. Rather, some people get to live in healthier neighborhoods, and some do not, a *prima facie* case of systemic injustice (see DeFilippis and Fraser Chapter 9, this volume). Moreover, to the extent that satisfaction with one’s community reflects the fact that one has no need to interact or engage in political contention with persons different from one’s self, such satisfaction is of dubious moral value (Oliver 2001; Williamson 2010; also see Spinner-Halev Chapter 7, this volume).³ Beginning an analysis of differences in residential satisfaction across the metropolitan areas from the standpoint of justice and citizenship thus leads to a fundamentally different interpretation of the evidence than starting from preference satisfaction (in either its libertarian or utilitarian mode).

But placing concerns about justice and citizenship at the starting point for evaluating sprawling metropolitan development has another consequence as well: it should lead us to move beyond the categories of pro-sprawl and anti-sprawl, as if "sprawl" were inherently bad for its own sake rather than for the consequences it may have for social justice and democratic citizenship. I say this even though in my view the impact of suburban sprawl and the spatial segregation of Americans by income and class on the equal opportunity and on the possibility of realizing the sort of social solidarity a just society requires is substantial and negative (Gainsborough 2001; Williamson 2008). But being "anti-sprawl" does not necessarily imply that one would favor a truly just metropolitan region; there are anti-democratic and exclusionary reasons to oppose sprawl, and anti-sprawl strategies may have either beneficial or negative effects from the standpoint of justice. Even sympathetic observers of the smart growth movement acknowledge "the movement is still in its early phases, making it difficult to forecast whether it will be exclusionary, inclusive, or neutral in its class-based and ethnic impacts" (Pendall, et al. 2005, 241)

What we are lacking is a sustained and persuasive account of both what a just city and a just metropolitan region would look like; that is, a metropolitan region not predicated on the reproduction of sharp racial and class inequalities, mediated by space, and not characterized by the over-concentration of social bads in particular, stigmatized neighborhoods. How this might be achieved given the existing levels of background inequality in U.S. society remains a major open question.

Sustainability and Sprawl

Equally critical and equally challenging is providing an account of how a just metropolis could also be both ecologically sustainable and economically functional. Consider the question of commuting across municipalities: Most suburban residents do not live where they work, and their need to get to employment creates enormous travel demands. Urban economists generally regard this state of affairs as both attractive and efficient, as it gives suburban residents access to jobs across the metropolitan area and expands their range of choice over what kind of community in which to live. Common, intuitively attractive conceptions of the ideal, nonsprawling city, however, often depict communities in which most people live and work in the same communities, in which a greater percentage of development is mixed use, and in which travel demands are reduced (Hester 2006). Economist William Bogart has attacked this implicit ideal of "autarkic" communities as economically irrational; instead, he urges, we should recognize the rationality of the

existing metropolitan area and the way that different municipalities “trade” with another (Bogart 2006). Implementing a system in which communities are organized such that most people lived quite close to where they worked and were happy to use buses for everyday trips would (it is charged) require not just piecemeal reforms and incentives aimed at steering the market, but a broader program of economic and social planning involving a much stronger role for the state.

There is good reason to think that Bogart and like-minded economists may be right on this point: that achieving just, ecologically sustainable cities would require more radical changes in the shape of our economy than most critics of sprawl acknowledge. This does not necessarily mean that critics of sprawl need drop their critique; it does mean that if the aim is to *fundamentally* shift how Americans live, the argument for smart planning to build communities that integrate work, home, and community space must be nested within a larger, more controversial argument for a different kind of economy, one in which democratic planning takes a more central role. Such democratic planning would involve a systemic effort to locate jobs closer to residents and encourage shorter commutes. Since commuting time is in large measure a function of the size and extent of metropolitan areas, it might also require directing population away from the largest metropolises into smaller metropolitan regions. It would also require a systemic program to preserve and rebuild the economic bases of declining cities to slow or reverse long-term patterns in which some American cities decline and die while others grow rapidly, in part to accommodate America’s internal migrants (Williamson, et al. 2002). This is the truth, then, in the libertarian arguments about sprawl: Challenging sprawl *in its fundamentals* probably requires a more fundamental departure from market-based land use than most New Urbanist and Smart Growth advocates have been willing to acknowledge.

To be sure, this does not mean that no useful steps can be taken to build more just metropolises, in the process slowing or limiting sprawl, in the absence of a dramatic shift in our political-economic structure. It does mean that such steps must take the more modest form of reconfiguring the sorts of incentives shaping metropolitan development as well as altering the menu of choices available to citizens about what kind of community in which to live. A good place to start would be a sharply reinvigorated effort to help the least well-off places, by tackling the political, social, and economic dysfunctions of our central cities and their “worst” neighborhoods with the aim of denting at least some of the “push” factors that have made suburban residence nearly synonymous with middle-class social status in the United States. A second point of attack is to focus on challenging suburban zoning policies that constrict the ability of metropolitan residents to choose to live in a relatively high-density, walkable suburban community.

Although such steps are (relative to the status quo) rather ambitious, they do not fundamentally challenge either the resource-intensive nature of the suburban way of life or the separation of work and residence that is characteristic of sprawling metropolises. Given growing concern with the impact of automobile-dependent, low-density spatial forms on metropolitan carbon footprints (Ewing, et al. 2008), there is good reason to think that much more radical steps will be needed if American metropolitan areas are to achieve rapid cuts in carbon emissions. These more radical steps all involve a more active state role in not just land use but also economic planning. Specifically, major investments in public transportation infrastructure (R. Gilbert and Perl 2008), major investments in helping to retrofit existing suburban places (Dunham-Jones and Williamson 2008), and (as noted previously) the use of aggressive policies aimed at targeting jobs and investments to central city areas (Williamson, et al. 2002), will be required. In the United States in particular, where population growth is projected to continue at a rapid clip in the twenty-first century, it likely also will be necessary to revive the idea of planned new suburban communities (Forsyth 2005), built from the beginning on strong sustainability principles, to accommodate the newcomers in a sustainable fashion. Changes of this magnitude would indeed involve altering the political-economic structures governing metropolitan development in fundamental ways. Instead of simply eliminating those market “distortions” that now exacerbate sprawl, these far-ranging steps would involve direct public influence over investment and growth patterns, with the explicit aim of shaping investment according to ecological criteria, not in order to maximize aggregate preference satisfaction. Stabilizing capital in particular places also will require aggressively promoting place-based forms of ownership. Taken together, these more radical steps would amount to a significant reconfiguration of the division of labor between capital and the state, and would necessarily challenge one of the fundamental features of capitalist societies: private control of investment (Harvey 1973).

Conclusion

As noted at the outset, the acceptance and resonance of the term *sprawl* has provided a rhetorical opening to critics of the American metropolis. Many urban scholars routinely describe sprawl as a “bad,” problematic thing to be avoided or as a pejorative adjective. Indeed, the term can and should continue to function as a useful conversation starter for serious inquiries into American metropolitan areas and their problems. But as long as the term is simply a code word for a bundle of things people don’t like about American cities and suburbs, railing against sprawl will give us only limited leverage in addressing

the metropolis's most fundamental problems. Serious empirical scholars of sprawl have long recognized this point, which has motivated ever-more precise attempts to define sprawl and quantify its effects. Such efforts are important, but incomplete: We need to pay equal attention to the normative questions underlying contemporary debates about the American metropolis.

As this chapter has shown, defenders of the metropolitan status quo appeal to a set of normative criteria with powerful resonance in American political culture to build their case on behalf of the decentralized, automobile-oriented, spatially segregated metropolis. Such defenses of sprawl cannot be refuted by facts alone. Consequently, advocates of serious metropolitan reform in the United States would be better served by resting their case not simply, as is commonly done, on yet another recitation of sprawl's specific harms, but by appealing to the core values of justice, citizenship, and sustainability. If sprawl is compatible with (or even promotes) justice, citizenship, and sustainability, no one should be against it. Conversely, if sprawl significantly undermines those goods—goods absolutely central to the functioning and stability of a free, self-governing society—then it needs to be reformed, even if doing so requires challenging (some) people's existing preferences.

Notes

1. In descriptive terms, the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey data show that residents of census tracts with population density greater than 8,000 persons per mile had a 26 percent likelihood of rating their community as "excellent," whereas residents' tracts with density less than 2,000 persons per mile had a 47 percent likelihood of rating their community so highly.

2. Libertarians might defend the sorting of neighborhoods by class (and even race) by appealing to the value of freedom of association. Freedom of association is specifically listed by Rawls as a basic liberty, and in his account of justice basic liberties take priority over distributive concerns. So a Rawlsian account of metropolitan social justice needs to explain why residential segregation is not a fundamental right protected by freedom of association. The short explanation is that the liberty principle does not call for *maximizing* liberties, nor does it treat any particular liberty as an absolute right; rather, the worth of a given liberty is to be assessed by the degree to which it contributes to our sense of justice and our ability to identify and pursue a conception of the good. On this understanding, voluntary clustering of like-minded persons into particular neighborhoods is not problematic and can be justified by freedom of association; but efforts to in effect escape from the social contract and draw up barriers around communities on the basis of class would not enjoy similar warrant. Such exclusionary behavior tends to *undermine*, not enhance, citizens' sense of justice, and also restricts the abilities of others (those excluded) to pursue their own ends. Put another way, freedom of association should be treated as a basic liberty when it is used as an instrument of democratic citizenship, not when

it is used for anti-democratic purposes. For related discussions, see L. King (2004) and Williamson (2010).

3. Analyzing the 1990 Citizen Participation Survey using the municipality as the level of analysis, Oliver (2001) found that local political participation was lower in economically homogenous municipalities (generally suburbs). Using the 2000 Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey, I found that numerous forms of nonelectoral political participation are consistently and markedly higher in older, less-automobile-oriented central city neighborhoods than in younger, more automobile-oriented suburban areas (Hopkins and Williamson 2008; Williamson 2002, 2010).