Post-Suburbia

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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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Post-Suburbia: Government and Politics in the Edge Cities.

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New Government for a New Metropolis

By the 1980s and early 1990s a number of commentators were discovering a new phenomenon along the fringe of metropolitan America. Writing in the *Atlantic* in 1986, Christopher Leinberger and Charles Lockwood described the emergence of interdependent “business, retail, housing, and entertainment focal points” scattered about the “low-density cityscape” of the metropolitan periphery.¹ A year later, historian Robert Fishman wrote of the transformation of suburbia into a new form of settlement that possessed “all the economic and technological dynamism . . . associate[d] with the city.” According to Fishman, “this phenomenon, as remarkable as it is unique, is not suburbanization but a new city.”² Then in 1991 journalist Joel Garreau introduced this concept to a broader readership in his *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier.* “Americans are creating the biggest change in a hundred years in how we build cities,” Garreau proclaimed. Like the prophets that had come before him, he wrote of “multiple urban cores” along the metropolitan fringe as the “new hearths of . . . civilization.”³ In this book and in numerous articles on the subject, Garreau told Americans that the traditional notion of the city was an anachronism.⁴ Metropolitan America no longer conformed to the wheel metaphor with the hub in the central city and the suburbs on the rim. In fact, the former rim was now composed of a series of business hubs, which failed to rotate around the traditional core. According to all of these observers, “suburb” had become a misnomer. Economically and socially, the periphery was no longer a subordinate dependent of the center and thus no longer a candidate for the prefix sub.

Leinberger and Lockwood referred to these new outlying centers as urban villages, Fishman called them technoburbs, Garreau opted for edge cities, and still others have applied the label post-suburban metropolis. The phenomenon so defied tradition that no one could agree what to call it. To some it made metropolitan America almost incomprehensible. “Cities have become impossible to describe,” wrote one observer in 1992. “Their centers are not as central as they used to be, their edges are ambiguous, they have no beginnings and apparently
no end.” The periphery was not peripheral in this new illogical world, and the center was not central. As the twentieth century closed, it seemed as if Americans were going to have to discard past intellectual preconceptions about the metropolis and fashion a new vision. Just as in the post-Copernican world notions of the solar system had to change, so in the post-Garreau era Americans had to struggle to reconceptualize the city. The metropolitan fringe no longer orbited around the urban core. Consequently, a new model of the metropolis was necessary.

To any halfway conscious American, the revelations of Leinberger, Lockwood, Fishman, and Garreau should long have been apparent. By the late 1970s and early 1980s glass office towers and glitzy hotels were already sprouting at freeway interchanges, and traffic was converging on outlying office and research parks as well as the giant malls that had dominated American retailing for a decade. Anyone driving along the freeways circling major metropolitan areas could see the vast changes. The driver was as likely to face traffic gridlock at an interchange along the periphery as on a downtown street. And anyone who shopped was aware of the contrast between shuttered downtown department stores and jammed outlying emporiums. Though the minds of Americans were still programmed to think in terms of hub and rim, their eyes told them traditional concepts were obsolete. The metropolitan world had been transformed, and formerly suburban areas were now centers of commerce and industry as well as residence and recreation. In fact, the edge had an economic life of its own, which challenged that of the older central cities and in some cases seemed to supersede it.

This, then, was the new city that was the home, workplace, and playground for tens of millions of Americans. And by the 1990s it appeared to be the wave of the future. This is where construction was taking place, where employment was expanding. In the minds of Garreau, Fishman, and their fellow prognosticators, this was the America of the twenty-first century. Like it or not, this seemed to represent the direction in which America was headed.

In the growing number of books and articles about this cutting-edge world, relatively little, however, was written about its governmental institutions. Like the edge cities themselves, these institutions had emerged during recent decades, creating a pattern of government that confounded and confused many observers of the metropolitan fringe. Just as the pattern of post-suburban life defied traditional concepts, so did its governmental institutions. Political scientists had long deplored the fragmentation of suburbia into a multitude of separate municipalities, townships, and special districts. Accounts of suburban government and politics used such terms as crazy quilt and such damning
phrases as overlapping jurisdiction and wasteful duplication. The governmental institutions of the metropolitan fringe were political perversions, violating textbook formulas of good government. As the metropolitan periphery developed into the post-suburban metropolis, the nature of its government became even more obscure and even less comprehensible. Whereas suburban government was familiar, though seemingly disorganized, the post-suburban polity was an alien being. To Americans raised on the distinction that municipalities provided police and fire protection and water and sewage services whereas counties and townships were units of rural government, the governments of post-suburban areas were a mystery. Counties exercised powers traditionally associated with municipalities, municipalities contracted for services rather than producing them, townships often seemed no different from municipalities, and a multitude of special districts, both big and small, were responsible for everything from killing mosquitoes to maintaining cemeteries. If one wanted a traffic light at the corner, whom did one petition? Who was in charge? These questions have troubled many metropolitan residents, and students of urban America have not offered adequate answers as to the origins or meaning of the government of post-suburban America.

This book will chart the emergence of the post-suburban polity and attempt to explain why and how it developed. It will discuss the adaptation of traditional units of government to the ideals and demands of the changing world along the metropolitan fringe. And it will describe the resulting pattern of rule, a pattern unlike any recommended in the traditional textbooks but well suited to the predilections of post-suburban America.

Specifically, this study will focus on six counties that were among the pioneers of the post-suburban world. They are Suffolk and Nassau Counties in New York; Oakland County, Michigan; DuPage County, Illinois; Saint Louis County, Missouri; and Orange County, California. Each of these counties has developed into a center of commerce as well as residence, and in some cases overshadow the nearby central city. They are home to millions of Americans, but they remain largely ignored. A researcher will find scores of references to the city of Oakland, California, but few citations for Oakland County, Michigan, even though it is three times more populous. To anyone living outside New York, one has to explain where Nassau County is, but every alert American knows the location of Boston, a city less than half as large. The six counties are relatively anonymous giants, which have developed seemingly without anyone paying much attention.

Each of the counties is representative of the post-suburban phenomenon. Located to the east of New York City on Long Island, Nassau and Suffolk Coun-
ties together constituted one of the first suburban regions to be designated a separate metropolitan area by the federal census bureau. During the post-World War II era, the aircraft industry provided tens of thousands of jobs in the two counties, lessening the economic dependence of Nassau and Suffolk on New York City. With the growth of other industries and the development of office parks, the typical Long Islander no longer commuted to Manhattan but worked in his or her own county. Not only were the two counties in the forefront of post-suburban economic development, they were forerunners in re-forming the structure of government along the metropolitan periphery. Even before World War II, Nassau County experimented with a new structure of government which was to influence reform efforts in suburban and post-suburban areas throughout the United States.

During the 1970s and 1980s Oakland County, Michigan, north of Detroit, was the emerging business center of southeastern Michigan and the generator of what little economic vitality existed in that troubled region. Within Oakland, the cities of Southfield and Troy became centers of office employment with a full complement of high rises and corporate campuses testifying to their economic success. Moreover, by 1990 the population of Oakland had surpassed that of Detroit, and its fortunes had clearly eclipsed those of the Motor City. Yet along the county’s many lakes and nestled among its hills were some of the most costly residences in the Midwest, and the county’s good life remained a much sought after goal for upwardly mobile Michiganders. With an inventory of office space surpassing that of Detroit, plus some of the poshest residential communities in the nation, Oakland County was an archetypical post-suburban metropolis.

By the early 1990s DuPage County, Illinois, west of Chicago, was on everyone’s list of edge cities. With high-tech research parks, a thirty-one-story skyscraper, the corporate headquarters of McDonald’s, and mile after mile of high-priced residential subdivisions, it was the epitome of Garreau’s vision of the future. It included some older commuter suburbs such as Elmhurst and Glen Ellyn, but it was also the site of Naperville, one of the Midwest’s few boomtowns of the late twentieth century. During the 1970s and 1980s, the county proved a rare bright spot in the economic gloom of Illinois.

To the south, Saint Louis County, Missouri, was an early example of the phenomenon Garreau and Fishman identified. The county arcs around, but does not include, the city of Saint Louis, Missouri’s Constitution of 1875 having authorized the permanent separation of the two governmental units. The county seat of Clayton was among the first suburban centers of office employment, rivaling the downtown of the adjacent city of Saint Louis as early as the 1960s.
In later decades, population and commerce moved westward through the county, enhancing its position in the regional economy. By the 1980s the county had more than twice the population of the central city of Saint Louis. Finally, in the minds of many late-twentieth-century observers, Orange County, California, was the quintessential post-suburban metropolis, a land of traffic-clogged freeways, giant shopping malls, expansive office and industrial parks, and thousands of homes in what realtors call the executive price range. Located south of Los Angeles along the Pacific coast, by 1990 it had a population of more than 2.4 million. Among its largest cities were Anaheim, famed as the home of Disneyland, and the giant planned community of Irvine.

Each of these six counties was in the first wave of post-suburban development. During the mid-twentieth century they became the home of millions of middle-class residents attracted to traditional suburban bedroom communities. But in the late twentieth century the counties faced the reality that they were no longer quiet retreats from urban madness. They were themselves urban, though a new kind of urban. They were the first areas to experience this new reality, and thus they faced the extraordinary challenge of coping with it. By the close of the century, these pioneers were facing competition from newer, fresher post-suburban areas. Nassau County was clearly aging, the urban frontier of northeastern Illinois was moving into Kane County to the west of DuPage, Saint Charles County was beginning to outshine adjacent Saint Louis County, and the “inland empire” of San Bernardino and Riverside Counties was the scene of more vital economic growth than the older Orange County areas. But the six counties discussed in this book were the pathfinders; they first confronted the dilemmas of the new world of edge cities and they molded the post-suburban polity.

Each did not respond in the same way, however. Their histories and governmental institutions differ. Yet they share certain identifiable patterns. Facing similar problems, they arrived at similar solutions. Each of these areas contributed to a common governmental foundation for the future.

Basic to the emerging post-suburban polity is the tension between suburban ideals and post-suburban realities. Residents of Nassau, Oakland, and Orange Counties rebelled against what they perceived as urban. They had escaped from the city to find a better life in the suburbs, and they clung to their suburban ideal even while high rises rose at freeway interchanges a few miles from their backyards. Economically these areas may have become post-suburban, but intellectually and emotionally they were solidly suburban. Residents valued the small, the intimate, and the homogeneous—characteristics that they associated with village life and were alien to the overpowering, indifferent, and di-
verse big city. They sought to preserve the green open space and clear waters of the rural past and longed nostalgically for the fields and forests that had first drawn them from the city. The people of post-suburban America remained resolutely anti-urban even as their world became increasingly urbanized.

Yet at the same time they recognized the merits of the changes transforming their counties. Eager for lower tax rates, they could not help but welcome tax-paying businesses. As long as a tax-rich office tower was not visible from their patios and the employees did not jam their streets, then such development might well prove a boon. Few in DuPage or Saint Louis County yearned for a skyscraper next door, but many dreamed of a high rise easing their tax bills. Moreover, the giant malls offered the convenience of nearby shopping. The advantages of having Marshall Field’s or Macy’s only a few miles away were incontestable. And the more places of employment along the metropolitan fringe, the shorter the commute to work. Sylvan suburbia remained the ideal, but the merits of deviating from that ideal were readily apparent.

Consequently, life in the post-suburban metropolis was a delicate balance. The suburban ideal had to be preserved while the useful urban realities were tolerated. If the area seemed to be tipping too far toward the urban side, residents would raise cries of outrage against rapacious developers who supposedly wanted to transform Suffolk County into Manhattan and Oakland County into Detroit. But development that imposed no burden and remained at arm’s length elicited applause.

The emerging post-suburban polity reflected this tenuous balance. Throughout the late twentieth century, residents of the post-suburban metropolis continued to prefer the small unit of government. Despite attacks on the governmental fragmentation of the metropolitan fringe, the myriad municipalities survived and were even joined by some newly incorporated cities and villages. Voters generally did not eschew what they perceived as grass-roots local government, and the rhetoric of post-suburbia continued to laud the supposed voluntarism and governmental intimacy of the existing municipalities. Parochialism remained part of the political creed of the post-suburban metropolis. Big government was a bogey raised repeatedly in political campaigns. It was the antithesis of the suburban ideal and anathema to the values of the village.

Yet while mouthing the glories of village life, residents of the post-suburban metropolis recognized the need for some overarching authority and supported the creation and strengthening of some unifying institutions. To some degree county government assumed a coordinating function and represented the post-suburban metropolis in its dealings with the outside world. Traditionally a unit of rural government charged with maintaining the courts, repairing country
roads, and operating the local jail, county government was to expand its role markedly in the post-suburban areas of the late twentieth century. Especially during the 1970s and 1980s some politicians sought to make the county into a regional supegovernment and the principal policymaker along the metropolitan fringe. They met with only limited success, but at the close of the century the county had deviated significantly from its long-standing hayseed image. In 1990 the governments of Nassau, Suffolk, Oakland, DuPage, Saint Louis, and Orange Counties bore little resemblance to county rule in 1920 or 1930. The county was the unit that helped suburbanites move into the post-suburban era without too seriously compromising their traditional ideals.

Yet if the county became too dictatorial or centralized too much authority in the county seat, then revolt was probable. For the balance between local and central had to be maintained. Just as post-suburbanites could tolerate high rises if they did not seriously threaten the suburban way of life, residents could accept growing county authority if it did not compromise the much-vaunted values of village rule. Commercial development was a practical necessity in order to relieve the local tax burden and to provide jobs and shopping, and enhanced county authority was equally necessary in the densely populated post-suburban regions. But if commercial development or government centralization went too far, then the electorate would raise its voice in loud protest. Excessive commerce and excessive government centralization were both urban characteristics unwelcome along the anti-urban fringe.

The county, however, was not the only institution that attempted to draw together the fragmented post-suburban metropolis. In some localities, municipalities formed leagues, which developed into important players in the politics of America's edge cities. Through these leagues of municipalities, the city and village governments of DuPage or Saint Louis County could join together to act on policy issues affecting them all. Together the disparate municipalities could speak with a united voice and exert considerable influence on county and state governments. Moreover, at the league meetings, mayors forged alliances and thrashed out mutual problems. Ultimately, the goal of the leagues was the protection and preservation of the member municipalities. Thus municipalities worked together to ensure that they could work apart.

Metropolitan special districts likewise guaranteed some coordination with regard to certain functions of government as did the multitude of intermunicipal agreements binding the fragments of the post-suburban metropolis. A series of treaties defined the territorial spheres of influence of conflicting municipalities, thereby lessening the likelihood of annexation wars. Scores of contracts guaranteed mutual assistance by police and fire departments. Through these means,
governments sought to cope with the demands of densely populated post-suburbia while perpetuating the village values of a semirural America.

The history of the post-suburban polity is, then, a story of an increasingly delicate balance of power. Post-suburban leaders attempted to preserve the traditional values of suburban life and government. Yet at the same time they sought to fashion a government that could deal with urbanized centers of business. The result was a complex, and not always successful, governmental system tuned to respond to the often conflicting demands of the suburban and the post-suburban. Traditional American city government had evolved in the nineteenth century to foster urbanization and to provide the public services and facilities necessary to enhance the development of a great metropolis. Mayors boosted urban growth, and the goal of both the public and private sectors was the creation of a city bigger than any of its rivals. Post-suburban government, in contrast, evolved as a mechanism to maintain a suburban way of life and to cope with post-suburban problems. The goal was not the creation of a big city. Instead, the goal was the perpetuation of small-scale village life and the creation of a big tax base. Throughout the mid- and late twentieth century, residents from Suffolk to Orange struggled to adapt their governmental institutions to this new imperative. In the process they fashioned organs of local government for the world of the future.