

## SUBURBIA AGAINST SOCIALISM.

### UNITED STATES PROPOSALS FOR THE METROPOLIS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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#### ABSTRACT

*This article focuses on several proposals suggested by scholars and intellectuals during the late fifties with the hope to solve urban conflicts in the United States. Their efforts towards an urban debate helped to the discussion, but the federal government did not implement significant reforms. The scholars and intellectuals' propositions were accompanied by radical suggestions, challenging Federal Government's decisions. This article analyze how such critical essays established the need for change the urban policies, and it concludes how those writings played an essential role in the definition of new policies as well as new political tendencies.*

**Key words:** Luther Gulick, Lewis Mumford, William Whyte, Robert Wood, Suburbs, metropolitan government.

#### INTRODUCTION

One of the most recognizable images of wealth and growth in America is the suburban pattern developed in the fifties. This prosperity has been related to Dwight Eisenhower's eight years of presidency and his policies on highways construction and financing houses. The decade started also with rhetoric sparked through the publication of the first prominent book, The Lonely Crowd, which criticized American's changing cultural behaviours (RIESMAN et al., 1950). As a part of a series in Studies in National Policy organized by the Yale University Press, this book intended to characterize novel social behaviours presented across new suburban inhabitants, most of who were living away from the city for the first time in their lives.

At the end of the decade, suburban sprawl resulted in an unexpected metropolitan growth that reflected a governmental chaos and its consequential criticism. Each individual suburb was an independent unit without any political relation with the city or the region. Without any policies to regulate the land, United States government did not politically react to prevent urban growth. Since there was neither regulation on urban land nor on urban planning, many scholars and public intellectuals, closely related with the regional planning association and the planner's institute, started to analyze urban planning developments' future, reaching to the criticism that The Lonely Crowd provoked.

Criticism shown by scholars and intellectuals, who could not be classified as planners or politicians, yet most were considered as part of an "elite" (COSER, 1965; KADUSHIN, 1974), was a key form of participation from a minor part of the society. Some of the so-called 'public intellectuals' publicized their ideas in popular medias, as well as in books that swiftly became best sellers. Their proposals nourished a debate reaching the U.S.' Congress discussions. Urban debate hence became a political issue in the 1960's presidential campaign, forcing the democrat candidate, John F. Kennedy to take into consideration proposals for urban solutions.

This paper intends to undertake two central tasks. The first is to introduce the role of the government on urban changes. The second task is to highlight some of the metropolitan changes suggested by four scholars, who later fuelled governmental policies: Robert C. Wood, William H. Whyte, Lewis Mumford and Luther H. Gulick. As a conclusion, we will analyze how such proposals reached the political arena, and their relationship with urban transformation and urban reform.

## INTELLECTUAL'S IDEAS: BETWEEN A REPUBLIC AND A DEMOCRATIC ERA.

Since the election of the Republican candidate Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1952, the country started an era of change. To begin with, both parties wanted for him as a candidate, creating the image of Eisenhower as a heroic leader in post war times. With huge rating approvals supporting him, in 1956 Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act, creating the Interstate Highway Program, the largest public works program in the U.S.' history: "the result has been the literal transformation of American Life" (KATZ, PUENTES, 2005). This was his first public project, which reorganized the country following highways systems connecting all states between them. Eisenhower thus supported private enterprises' enlargement: from automobiles production, which has struggled since the end of the WWII, up to urban developers, who saw highways constructions as a way to built the rural fringes. These measures allowed him to lead a country mostly engaged in private developments, at a time when senator McCarthy was fuelling popular fears with communist invasion ideas (GRIFFITH, 1987). Eisenhower then became the leader of a country in which the lesser educated population took a long time to learn how to form an opinion about any international matter and even more time to change it (RIESMAN, GLAZER, 1964), and in which the communist fear was a patriotic assessment against everything related with common property and public opinion.

Land property showed more growth than ever during the fifties, and since the suburbs were offering more than a roof, property was swiftly related with suburbs as its urban shape. U.S. growth was accelerating and by 1960, about 30.5% of Americans, or 55 million of 180 million, lived in suburbs. Thus urban sprawl was a country's concern, since many in Congress thought that state and local governments were unable to respond to metropolitan problems without significant federal intervention. In the mean time 'the middle classes' who had moved to the suburban areas, were considered a class without any influence. Even if this class maintained the country's economic prosperity, it was named the discontented class (RIESMAN, GLAZER, 1964). In this atmosphere, the fifties intellectual's enthusiasm and vitality started to become almost exclusively part of the universities, leaving public opinion without academic intervention.

Thus the 1960's presidential campaign held a long debate on urban solutions. Candidate John F. Kennedy promised that if elected he would create a Department of Urban Affairs (PRITCHETT, 1960). Supported by many scholars, the new president traced the end of the fifties era, starting a new decade of research for urban solutions. Yet, as Americans emerged from fifties' quietude, John F. Kennedy would help usher a new age of social activism and cultural unrest, for which intellectuals, scholars and activists were already prepared. Thus, after the prosperous Eisenhower years of the 'American Dream', it became the tumultuous sixties of 'The Great Society.' Nonetheless, Kennedy was a product of the Eisenhower years, and as well as his predecessor, private interests coated him. His social measures were not as radical as he would have us believe, and although he was broadly support by intellectual critique, his urban reforms passed through Congress with modest success. Even if his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson had been called the greatest American president ever for combating the urban problems, these times remained without effective solutions.

In that sense, the sixties presented failures in both political and economical systems, reflected in urban planning. Nonetheless democrats in power brought a new kind of idealism. In the early 1960s, most urban policymakers believed that the problems of metropolitan growth -traffic congestion, loss of open space, and an inefficient government- were the most pressing concerns, helping democrats to develop the idea of a 'Great Society' within an urban context. Indeed in a speech at the University of Michigan in 22<sup>nd</sup> of May, 1964, the President Lyndon B. Johnson quoted Aristotle idyllically regarding the relationship between man and cities: "Our society will never be great until our cities are great," the President declared (JOHNSON, 1964).

Scholars and public intellectuals fed this search of a 'Great Society.' Most of them started to work together publishing critical books on urban studies, as well as leading conferences and public debates, trying to drive urban policies

transformations. In a time when radicalization could be worse than alienation, intellectuals and scholars never held back in presenting their ideas on urban issues. They were polemical if not belligerent against the establishment, and by looking more closely at the socialist inspiration than towards the capitalist perspective of growth and benefits, they questioned the basic principles of the suburban development, and its primary idea of the Local Governmental Division in the United States.

## **SOME THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS ON SUBURBIA POLICIES**

During the fifties and the following decades, scholars nourished public debates, despite their apparent absence of the political arena. It is hard to generalize, but the most popular intellectuals became national best sellers, writing at the same time in popular newspapers and magazines. Some of them, who had spent their early years at the university, later became part of the Federal Government.

Since the urban problems were focused on the suburbs, scholars and intellectuals started to analyze this issue from different perspectives. Land property, class affinities, government perspectives, and further subjects came to fore. The breaking point of main discussions was the development of rural fields regardless of planning or management rules. In that sense, scholars saw the genesis of the suburban development in the British 'Garden City' idea, and looked at it as a utopian urban pattern. The original idea thus became a pattern to follow in order to achieve a better urban development: it expressed the necessity of communal land property, as well as a regional government, both points that scholars and intellectual's propositions started to query in the search of a better future for the country's urban development.

From the late fifties and the early sixties urban publications, we will highlight four books in order to explain and relate to date the metropolitan government as a theoretical and crucial discourse for our urban world.

### **ROBERT C. WOOD, A NEW LOOK ON SUBURBAN STUDIES.**

In 1958, Robert Coldwell Wood, who later became the Under Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development during the Johnson government, wrote a book called *Suburbia, its People and their Politics*. He was a recent graduated Ph.D in government who soon became involved in university life at an administration level. As "another book of American suburb," it was barely noticed by the media, but it was revolutionary inside the academia. It questions first the complexity of political relationship between suburbs and its inhabitants, and secondly the waste of land and political effort in the construction of suburbs and metropolitan developments. Wood continues nourishing the suburb debate started during the early fifties, calling for more political approaches.

While critics were seeing the suburbs as the revelation of a modern America with a growing and consuming middle class, Wood looks at this development as the contrary: a step back towards colonial times. 'Suburbia' for Wood reveals the anachronistic relation between the modern American man and his political environment, displaying a drastic continuation of the first American urban settlements with a local and not such powerful government. In that sense, suburbs' government appears obsolete from their conception, giving the impression that the small community produces the best life, and more particularly, the best local authority.

Wood's propositions attempt to change suburban government scale. Since the suburbs are in constantly spreading, threatening the agricultural lands, they should have a metropolitan government to manage them. It is not simply a matter of practicality, thinks Woods, but a matter of sustainable development. Therefore, he explains the Garden City pattern as an ideal example to manage cities or suburbs at a regional scale. But in this sense, Garden City's idea of government seems to derive from the precincts of a socialist reform.

The idea of a metropolitan government was totally against American suburban development. The suburban unit scale in America was used to keep their exclusive

borders, a limit that was creating deep controversies by stimulating the production of gated communities, almost exclusively made of the white middle classes. Besides the car market growing as well as men's professionalization, the suburban scale was following a corporate philosophy in which everyone gets what he or she wants. In that sense, Wood was looking for a planning tool able to keep this 'dream' unharmed. Thus, a metropolitan government helps to join communities at a region scale, keeping their independence and maintaining communal goals, like improvement of public transport and development of local resources such as schools and sports centres. In other words, the metropolitan government strengthened relations, already well instilled with the construction of the federal highway.

Since suburban communities were mobilized against the idea of the metropolitan government, Woods believed that they fell into a "historical confusion", considering land property as a house in a tiny plot within a region. In that sense, it seems that an irony appears in suburbia conception: in a country that had grown with the aim of progress and change as beneficial, suburbia keeps the most grassroots legacy maintaining the original idea of the village. America thus regrets the idea of the metropolis: "the American faith loses its best opportunity to defeat the corporate philosophy at its own game." The rejection of the metropolis as a governmental level involves, in Wood's words, the possibility of securing a cosmopolitan pattern of living, created by a free people and maintained by a free government.

Therefore, Wood blames Americans for fearing metropolitan changes. He insists in his book that a modern man needs a modern government, and in 1961 he revealed a real dreadful in a book about New York Metropolitan Region in which he counts 1400 local governments (WOOD, 1961). Later he would go on to implement the Model Cities Program, dreaming of a metropolitan government with a possibility of change.

Appreciating how Wood's suggestions stretched and strengthened a metropolitan American liberty requires knowledge of similar propositions from popular voices. Metropolitan government benefits were also discussed by the editors of one of the most powerful media enterprise, William H. Whyte for The Times Inc.

#### THE URBAN SPRAWL AS A FIFTIES PATTERN: THE MEDIA CONTRIBUTION

In the same way as Wood, William Hollingsworth Whyte, the fifties chief editor of *Fortune*, in 1958 edited *The Exploding Metropolis*. It appears as a book openly against the suburban movement and the United States government policies. In its pages, Whyte and his colleagues accused the speculative building as entirely responsible of urban development.

Since urban development was so aggressive, Whyte and his colleagues were worried about rural soil. Because the highways had already been built or in process of being built, there was little chance of controlling their location, unless, says Whyte, the communities got together to secure a pattern of open space and orderly development. His aim was to create a citizen's movement to save the open space.

The idea became after a joint discussion of Times Inc. Corporation's publications. In close relation with his colleagues from *Architectural Forum*, Whyte organized the conference 'The City's Threat to Open Land' in 1958. Such a conference concluded with a chart of propositions for the days to come. Despite some pro metropolitan government participation, the chart would not demand the creation of a new level of government, but something quite more radical: the State Government should buy land in order to create a 'Special District Authority' which could regulate prices to avoid land speculations. Arguing suburban development as a "cliché" difficult to stop, the round table concluded that the "sprawl must be controlled" (AF, 1958). They advocated for more planning bodies to prevent further developments and open land sales. The round table looked for a commitment of States' Government in order to give them the power to encourage for a more equitable prices assessment. The land could be paid with the State's income, analysed the panellists, making a profit for the common good, and stabilizing metropolitan growth.

In that sense, the search for open land was a mechanism to return to the city. For Whyte, suburban development was so modern that it was destroying the American's cultural environments as well as their social relations. Contrary to Wood's propositions, Whyte was one of the creators of the Myth of the suburb, an early fifties tendency to censure suburban development as against American ideals.

Finally the debate for open land against suburban construction was part of the government agenda during the early sixties. In 1960, a number of liberal Democrats were pushing for a federal program to help local governments acquire large 'banks' of land at the limits of metropolitan settlement. Public officials could sell or hold the fringe properties in accordance with public plans. Nonetheless, the real estate and the homebuilding industries started to press State governments and media, discussing that the proposal was dangerous, and 'catastrophically socialist' (ROME, 1998).

Despite the ambition of Whyte and The Architectural Forum's proposals, the following administrations partially endorsed the land banking idea. The research for open land benefits was well accepted in Whyte's home state of New York. There, the 1960 legislature created a \$75 million program to help local governments acquire open space. Swiftly the idea spread over the main states and by 1965 six more states, including California, offered grants to local governments for open-space acquisition. Several other states began ambitious programs to acquire land for outdoor recreation -in some cases the open space acquired doubled. Across the nation, local spending for park acquisitions rose sharply in the early 1960s. The number of cities and counties with nature trails almost tripled from 1960 to 1965. A few local governments even acquired land solely to create greenbelts.

After this achievement, Whyte signed his retirement from the world of journalism to the environmental battle. He writes several books showing his engagement against private developments and urban sprawl. Several studies have shown him as one of the contemporary leaders on environmental protection (PLATT, 2006). But, what happened with the metropolitan idea? Why was Whyte's proposal so quickly accepted while a metropolitan government proposal for the region never passed?

#### **LEWIS MUMFORD AND THE METROPOLIS OF A DIFFERENT ERA.**

Even as a proposal of one of the most prestigious intellectuals of the United States, Lewis Mumford, the idea of a metropolitan government never became a central discussion in sixties' governmental program. Mumford appeared in this period as the author of an historical compendium of the city, in which he goes from its origins to the suburban sixties sprawl. His 1961 book The City in History received the National Book Award, and it pushed him to testify before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on the negative impacts of urban renewal (BILES, 1998). This work in particular shared a big part of Wood's thoughts.

Advocating for the city, including the suburban development as a cohesive space for public development, Mumford recalls Wood's explanation on metropolitan government in order to support it as a way of generating common goods and services, but as an impossible feature in a deviational pattern as the American City. In the five final chapters of his book, Mumford accuses the capitalist society of the construction of the American city, calling it the contrary of a public institution as in the ancient times. The American city, Mumford believes, is a private commercial venture to be carved up in any fashion that might increase the turnover and furthermore the rise in land values.

He is constantly reminding us that the original suburban pattern appeared as an option to escape from the city during the industrial revolution. Since the theory of this pattern regards property of land in common hands as something necessary to maintain better surroundings, Mumford proposes the land around the suburbs should belong to the people, and to be administered, not in the interests of the few, but in the real interests of the whole community. The Garden City pattern is for him one of the first attempts to generate a sustainable environment.

As well as Whyte and his colleagues, Mumford claims for an organized land property, but not only to prevent the consumption of open land, but also to control housing business. In fact public land property had demonstrated admirable results.

Mumford explains this with reference to Craig's plan for Edinburgh: such a city was possible because of "the unified ownership of the land, and the unified control of the architect and builder." He adds in a discourse addressed towards the American city, "if the land had been first broken up into individual parcels, sold to competitive private owners, each proud of his own tastes, jealous of his own whims, ferocious in defence of his own ideology, the result would have been the chaos that too often prevailed in the late nineteenth-century street, urban or suburban" (MUMFORD, 1960).

Mumford goes far beyond this proposal. Criticizing the capitalist economy as a system in which private developments prevailed, he believes that some public facility can be respected and achieved, like for instance a good public transport system or public schools. In that sense, Mumford condemns the reduction of people's possibilities in the country. Engaging *The Lonely Crowd's* critique against homogenisation and directed characters, Mumford believes that suburban Americans were holding the flag of freedom only superficially, because in reality suburban developments were encouraging them to be prisoners of other's interests, reducing among others, people's facilities to move. In this way, their lives practically became dependent on the private car.

Indeed, a mass public transport system has never been part of the public agenda. Since the Eisenhower era the federal government has allowed the deterioration of massive transport systems, encouraging the maximum use of the private car, hence reproducing a bizarre relation between the city and its suburbs. In order to gain suburbs' attention towards the downtown, municipalities invest in financing central stores, an action that failed because of the distance. As a result the relationship between the city and its metropolitan communities generates what Mumford calls a "weekend liaison", a totally different economic relation from a "marriage" where the decentralization of state governmental institutions consents the inclusion of the whole region.

Mumford as well as Wood declared his worries about suburban subdivision and metropolitan government. The American suburb is the result of economic speculations; it is the summary of free market policies; it is the end of common negotiations. Indeed, suburban development was the contrary of the American people's principles. It was not only a rejection of the past but also a sharp turn towards an aggressive future. Taking this stance, Mumford has been always considered as a left wing intellectual fuelling the lines of the most passionate activists. The Metropolitan Governmental proposals suddenly became a broad discussion on American ideals, commanding a more cohesive approach.

### THE METROPOLITAN GOVERNMENT AS AN AMERICAN IDEA

In 1962, four years after Wood's publication, Luther Gulick, the "Dean of American Institutions" and the director of the National Institute of Public Administration, wrote a book based on a series of lectures given at The Michigan University. The lectures were granted by the Stern Family foundation with the aim to explain the metropolitan government as a genuine "American idea."

In *The Metropolitan Problem and American Ideas*, Gulick follows Wood's proposals exploring new assignments for the government. As Mumford, he uses the frame of the capitalist ideals in order to call for government unification, independent from the State and the Federal Government, advocating more freedom for metropolitan regions. He demands from the federal government a decent co-ordination at the top of many federal programs, in order to have an impact on metropolitan affairs. At that time, Kennedy was already the president, and he was accomplishing what he promised during his campaign, the creation of a new cabinet department of urban affairs. Nonetheless Gulick like his predecessors, was looking for a real engagement, and he criticized the new department as the evidence that the Federal Government nostalgically believed that the United States remained a rural nation, looking at the metropolitan phenomenon as a temporary 'emergency.'

As a government and administration expert Gulick tries to explain the metropolitan government under American freedom ideals. Since freedom is the key word of the

American constitution, he explores in depth Wood and Mumford's proposals in order to explain the metropolitan government as a representation of autonomy even stronger at governmental level. If property, Gulick says, is the materialistic idea of power, it remains powerless in the suburbs, divided across hundreds and thousands of hands. In that sense, the metropolitan government is an institutionalization of the society's power; a power that the big cities achieved under the nineties urban theorists regard. Gulick was judged as a "revolutionary" for such a socialist approach (DIXON, 1963).

Gulick was probably the first to reflect on the social cohesion of the metropolitan area. As a democratic government, Gulick advocates that the metropolis must deal with social classes, races, industrial developments and economical planning, giving to the metropolitan scale more power to solve particular problems that apparently concern only local governments. In a land organized on unities a cohesive power is essential. Indeed Gulick insists that the federal government must honestly recognize "that there is nothing to be ashamed of when the national government does something for urban populations to help solve their nationwide metropolitan problems." Since private help is inexistent, its excessive benefits are defragmenting urban spaces and politics.

As well as Mumford, Gulick strongly criticized "the market mechanism", which collapsed as a regulator of both production and prices, and therefore the allocation of scarce resources. His remedy is to call for a metropolitan government that also involves Whyte's open land regulation proposal: as a conclusion the metropolitan level of regulation should not only allow but also endorse the freedom and needs of the people as well as of the developers.

Gulick's book reassembles Wood, Mumford and Whyte's proposals from the administrative point of view. In a time when many people advocates for total independence between public and private sectors, and the separation between politics and administration, Gulick advocates for engagements and activism, for a government made by the consensus of public and private powers, recognizing this association as a principle of freedom. His active implication in both the public and intellectual arena makes him a vigorous and stimulating actor of the mid twenty-century in America. Unfortunately these proposals were misinterpreted, and none of the aforementioned ideas were completely developed. Despite their engagement to participate in political discussion, scholars seemed unable to pledge for a better urban government.

## **INTELLECTUALS AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT. SOME ACHIEVEMENTS AS CONCLUSIONS**

The four personalities that we have evoked here are each distinct in their own right. In fact, what seems more problematic is that they are not only part of the academic sphere, but also they reached the institutional and government debates on urban problems. Intellectuals became refugees of the Academia (JACOBY, 1987). Nonetheless, they were a group of men who, whatever their field, took part in and contributed to general ideas and speculative thoughts, against a "New morality", and the rise of misconceptions towards communism, socialism and any relative word.

During the fifties, the intellectuals disappeared from the city. They were no longer living in Chicago, San Francisco or New York, but in the college towns, "safely distant from blighted city"(RUSSELL, 1987). Inside such an atmosphere they could no longer control what they produced. Despite their broad acceptance, their ideas soon became dissociated from them and their immediate coteries. Despite their intentions to integrate property and government, intellectuals and scholars were taken over by the function of dissemination and translation, and the alienation of their "product" left them with a feeling of impotence and isolation. Some intellectuals' ideas were quickly taken over by the mass media and transmitted into the common stock of middlebrow conceptions (RIESMAN, GLAZER 1964).

Nonetheless, in 1959, senators Joseph Clark and Nelson Rockefeller proposed the creation of a commission on Metropolitan Problems, following Whyte's proposals (PRITCHETT, 2008). They were looking for the reduction in consumption natural resources, and the coordination of traffic facilities and schools, but their bill never

passed. The United States Congress surely listened to intellectuals and scholars proposals, and in the late 1960s, tried to resurrect resettlement programmes following earlier garden city and greenbelt town designs (BILES, 1998). Hence, the Congress passed The New Towns Legislation, providing financial assistance to the private developers to build new towns across the country. However, during the 1980s the U.S. government concluded that the experiment had failed, finalizing the program. The sixties Great Society beliefs and the governmental implementation of intellectuals and scholars ideas, failed under the intention to recuperate the State's sovereignty in urban growth.

The metropolitan governmental idea under the Garden City pattern implies multiple items, including the environmental. Intellectuals and scholars call for a sustainable environment was not only related to natural resources, but also to their management. The idea also appeared to be against the U. S.' principles and desires, seemingly a left wing initiative. In that sense, Gulick was a little better able to present the idea, turning the urban sprawl into an American principles discussion, proclaiming the metropolitan government as the American way to be locally governed.

Nowadays no metropolitan area has been organized. Metropolitan 'governmental' division only counts within country's statistics. We can say that one of the most advanced countries continues growing as it were during its past colonial times, because of the apprehension towards a share government. The appeal for a metropolitan government remains, and the answer can be achieved by regarding contemporary urban history literature, which could fully nourish present times.

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