

HERBERT J. GANS

“Levittown and America”

from *The Levittowners* (1967)

Editors' introduction Herbert Gans is the author of two of the most fascinating and influential books of urban sociology ever published. *The Urban Villagers* is a brilliant study of the Italian-American immigrant community of Boston's North End neighborhood. *The Levittowners*, from which the following selection is taken, is Gans's analysis of post-World War II tract-home suburbia. Both are examples of the participant-observer methodology at its best. While never losing sight of objective scholarship, Gans lets the reader see and experience urban communities from the inside out.

Robert Fishman (p. 77) describes affluent suburbs surrounding mid-nineteenth-century Manchester, England, and Sam Bass Warner, Jr. (p. 69) documents how suburban the entire Los Angeles region had become by the 1920s. However, it was the period immediately following World War II that saw the massive middle-class suburbanization that established many of the suburbs we know today.

East Coast developer William Levitt capitalized on the enormous pent up demand for entry-level single-family suburban homes for returning servicemen and their new families. He combined mass production techniques and fantasy to create massive “Levittowns” in New York and Pennsylvania, which defined the post-war version of the American dream. Levittowns were built on vast tracts of exurban land. They were filled with spanking new, cute, affordable mass-produced imitation Cape Cod colonial homes like those in Plate 6's 1947 streetscape of Levittown, New York. In the late 1940s and 1950s young families lined up to buy into Levitt's version of the American dream and other developers borrowed freely from Levitt's ideas. But architects, social critics, and city planners were less enthusiastic about what this new physical and social form represented.

The suburban developments of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, in America and elsewhere, gave birth to a massive literature, much of it critical. Damned as automobile-dependent and socially/racially segregated, the post-World War II suburbs were called “sprawl” and stigmatized as “anti-cities” (to use Lewis Mumford's term) contributing to a stifling social conformity and cultural mediocrity. Titles such as John Keats's *The Crack in the Picture Window* (1956), Richard Gordon's *The Split-Level Trap* (1961), Kenneth Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier* (1985), and Mark Baldassare's *Trouble in Paradise* (1986) capture the tone of much of the commentary on the suburban way of life. One prominent feminist critic – Dolores Hayden in *Redesigning the American Dream* (1984) – has charged that the first Levittown was built specifically for “the returning veteran, the beribboned male war hero who wanted his wife to stay home.”

Given the overwhelming anti-suburban bias of most of these analyses, Gans's view of Levittown is remarkable in that it steadfastly rejects the notion that an easily definable “suburban way of life” even exists, much less that suburbia represents a distinctly new kind of socio-cultural place. On the contrary, Gans found the Levittowners to be much like hard-working middle-class people anywhere in the world engaged in the process of adapting their needs to new social and environmental situations. To be sure,

Levittown had its problems. Gans analyzes them in some detail and makes clear that Levittown is no utopia. But neither is it a spiritual wasteland.

As a classic analysis of life in a contemporary suburban development, Gans's *The Levittowners* should be compared and contrasted with other views of suburbia (see above) and to such anti-suburban celebrators of inner-city neighborhoods as Jane Jacobs (p. 106). Gans was prophetic in 1967 about the probability that "yet another ring of suburban communities will spring up around American cities" in the (then) near future. Such prescience points directly to the new communities described by Joel Garreau in *Edge City* (New York: Anchor, 1992) and to Robert Fishman's "technoburbs" (p. 77).

This selection is from *The Levittowners* (New York: Pantheon, 1967). Gans's other great work of urban sociology is *The Urban Villagers* (New York: Free Press, 1962). Related books by Gans include *People, Plans, and Policies: Essays on Poverty, Racism, and other National Urban Problems* (New York: Columbia University Press; Russell Sage Foundation, 1993), *The War Against the Poor: The Underclass and Antipoverty Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), and *Middle American Individualism: The Future of Liberal Democracy* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

For more on Levittown see Barbara M. Kelley, *Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown* (Buffalo: State University of New York Press, 1993) and W. D. Wetherell, *The Man Who Loved Levittown* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985).

Other notable books on suburbia include Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), John R. Stilgoe, *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820-1939* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), Barbara M. Kelley, *Suburbia Re-examined* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), and Philip Langdon, *A Better Place to Live: Reshaping the American Suburb* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994).

CONFLICT, PLURALISM, AND COMMUNITY

Although a part of my study was concerned with the possibilities of change and innovation, I do not mean to suggest that Levittown is badly in need of either. The community may displease the professional city planner and the intellectual defender of cosmopolitan culture, but perhaps more than any other type of community, Levittown permits most of its residents to be what they want to be — to center their lives around the home and the family, to be among neighbors whom they can trust, to find friends to share leisure hours, and to participate in organizations that provide sociability and the opportunity to be of service to others.

That Levittown has its faults and problems is undeniable . . . physical and social isolation,

familial and governmental financial problems, insufficient public transportation, less than perfect provision of public services, inadequate decision-making and feedback processes, lack of representation for minorities and overrepresentation for the builder, and the entire array of familial and individual problems common to any population. Many of them can be traced back to three basic shortcomings, none distinctive to Levittown or the Levittowners.

One is the difficulty of coping with conflict. Like the rest of the country, Levittown is beset with conflict: class conflict between the lower middle class group and the smaller working and upper middle class groups; generational conflict between adults, children, adolescents, and the elderly. The existence of conflict is no drawback, but the way conflict is handled leaves much to be desired. Levittowners, like other Americans, do

not really accept the inevitability of conflict. Insisting that a consensus is possible, they only exacerbate the conflict, for each group demands that the other conform to its values and accept its priorities. When power is a valuable prize and resources are scarce, such a perspective is understandable, but in Levittown the exercise of power is not an end in itself for most people; they want it mainly to control the allocation of resources. Since resources are not so scarce, however, the classes and age groups could resolve their conflicts more constructively than they do, giving each group at least some of what it wants. If the inevitability of conflicting interests were accepted, differences might be less threatening, and this would make it easier to reach the needed compromises. I am not sanguine that this will happen, for if people think resources are scarce, they act as if they are scarce, and will not pay an extra \$20 a year in taxes to implement minority demands. Even so, conditions to make viable compromises happen are more favorable in Levittown than in larger or poorer communities.

The second shortcoming, closely related to the first, is the inability to deal with pluralism. People have not recognized the diversity of American society, and they are not able to accept other life styles. Indeed, they cannot handle conflict because they cannot accept pluralism. Adults are unwilling to tolerate adolescent culture, and vice versa. Lower middle class people oppose the ways of the working class and upper middle class, and each of these groups is hostile to the other two. Perhaps the inability to cope with pluralism is greater in Levittown than elsewhere because it is a community of young families who are raising children. Children are essentially asocial and unacculturated beings, easily influenced by new ideas. As a result, their parents feel an intense need to defend familial values; to make sure that their children grow up according to parental norms and not by those of their playmates from another class. The need to shield the children from what are considered harmful influences begins on the block, but it is translated into the conflict over the school, the definitional struggles within the voluntary associations whose programs affect the socialization of children, and, ultimately, into political conflicts. Each group wants to put its cultural stamp on the organizations and institutions that are the

community, for otherwise the family and its culture are not safe. In a society in which extended families are unimportant and the nuclear family cannot provide the full panoply of personnel and activities to hold children in the family culture, parents must use community institutions for this purpose, and every portion of the community therefore becomes a battleground for the defense of familial values.

This thesis must not be exaggerated, for much of the conflict is, as it has always been, between the haves and the have-nots. Even if Levittown's median income is considerably above the national average even for white families, no one feels affluent enough to let other people determine how their own income should be spent. Most of the political conflict in the community rages over how much of the family income should be given over to the community, and then, how it should be used. In fact consensus about municipal policies and expenditures exists only about the house. Because many Levittowners are first-time homeowners, they are especially eager to protect that home against loss of value, both as property and as status image. But every class has its own status image and its own status fears. Working class people do not want to be joined by lower class neighbors or to be forced to adopt middle class styles. Lower middle class people do not want more working class neighbors or to be forced to adopt cosmopolitan styles, and upper middle class people want neither group to dominate them. These fears are not, as commonly thought, attributes of status-seeking, for few Levittowners are seeking higher status: they are fears about self-image. When people reject pluralism, they do so because accepting the viability of other ways of living suggests that their own is not as absolute as they need to believe. The outcome is the constant search for compatible people and the rejection of those who are different.

When the three class groups – not to mention their subgroupings and yet other groups with different values – must live together and share a common government, every group tries to make sure that the institutions and facilities which serve the entire community maintain its own status and culture, and no one is happy when another group wins. If working class groups can persuade the Township Committee to allocate funds for a firehouse, middle class groups unite in

a temporary coalition to guarantee that a library is also established. When the upper middle class group attempts to influence school policy to shape education to its standard, lower middle class residents raise the specter of Levittown aping Brookline and Scarsdale, while working class people become fearful that the schools will neglect discipline or that taxes will rise further. Consequently, each group seeks power to prevent others from shaping the institutions that must be shared. They do not seek power as an end in itself, but only to guarantee that their priorities will be met by the community. Similarly, they do not demand lower taxes simply for economic reasons (except for those few really hard pressed) but in order to be sure that community institutions are responsible to their familial values and status needs. Obviously, power sought for these ends is hard to share, and decisions for levying and allocating public funds are difficult to compromise.

The third shortcoming of the community, then, is the failure to establish a meaningful relationship between home and community and to reconcile class-cultural diversity with government and the provision of public services. Levittowners, like other Americans, not only see government as a parasite and public services as a useless expenditure of funds better spent privately, but they do not allow government to adapt these services to the diversity among the residents. Government is committed to the establishment of a single (and limited) set of public services, and its freedom to do otherwise is restricted by legislation and, of course, by American tradition.

Government has always been a minor supplier of services basic to everyday life, and an enemy whose encroachment on private life must be resisted. The primary source of this conception is the historic American prejudice against public services, which stems in part from the rural tradition of the individual and his family as a self-sufficient unit, but which is perpetuated by contemporary cultural values and made possible by the alliance which enables at least middle class families to live with only minimal dependence on local government. The bias against public services does not interfere with their use, however, but only with their financing and their extension and proliferation. Nor does it lead Levittowners to reject government outright, but only to channel it into a few limited functions.

Among these, the primary one is the protection of the home against diversity.

Government thus becomes a defense agency, to be taken over by one group to defend itself against others in and out of the community. The idea that it could have positive functions, such as the provision of facilities to make life richer and more comfortable, is resisted, for every new governmental function is seen first as an attempt by one community group to increase its dominance over others. Of course, these attempts are rarely manifest, for the political dialogue deals mainly with substantive matters, but when Levittowners spoke against a proposal, they were reacting principally against those who proposed it rather than against its substance.

Until government can tailor its actions to the community's diversity, and until people can accept the inevitability of conflict and pluralism in order to give government that responsibility, they will prefer to spend their money for privately and commercially supplied services. Unlike city hall, the marketplace is sensitive to diversities among the customers and does not require them to engage in political conflict to get what they want. Of course not all people can choose the marketplace over city hall, but Levittowners are affluent enough to do so. Moreover, until parents have steered their children safely into their own class and culture – or have given up trying – they are likely to seek out relatively homogeneous communities and small ones, so that they have some control over government's inroads against personal and familial autonomy. This not only maintains the sovereignty of hundreds of small local governments but also contributes to the desire to own a house and a free-standing one.

LEVITTOWN AS AMERICA

The strengths and weaknesses of Levittown are those of many American communities, and the Levittowners closely resemble other young middle class Americans. They are not America, for they are not a numerical majority of the population, but they represent the major constituency of the latest and most powerful economic and political institutions in American society – the favored customers and voters whom these seek to attract and satisfy. Upper middle class

Americans may spend more per capita and join more groups, but they are fewer in number than the lower middle classes. Working and lower class people are more numerous but they have less money and power; and people over 40, who still outnumber young adults, are already committed to most of the goods, affiliations, and ideas they will need in their lifetime.

Even so, Levittowners are not really members of the national society, or for that matter, of a mass society. They are not apathetic conformists ripe for takeover by a totalitarian elite or corporate merchandiser; they are not conspicuous consumers and slaves to sudden whims of cultural and political fashion; they are not even organization men or particularly other-directed personalities. Clearly, inner-directed strivers are a minority in Levittown, and tradition-directed people would not think of moving to a new community of strangers, but most people maintain a balance between inner personal goals and the social adjustment necessary to live with neighbors and friends that, I suspect, is prevalent all over lower middle class America . . . Although ethnic, religious, and regional differences are eroding, the never-ending conflicts over other differences are good evidence that Levittowners are far from becoming mass men.

Although they are citizens of a national polity and their lives are shaped by national economic, social, and political forces, Levittowners deceive themselves into thinking that the community, or rather the home, is the single most influential unit in their lives. Of course, in one way they are right; it is the place where they can be most influential, for if they cannot persuade the decision-makers, they can influence family members. Home is also the site of maximal freedom, for within its walls people can do what they want more easily than anywhere else. But because they are free and influential only at home, their dependence on the national society ought to be obvious to them. This not being the case, the real problem is that Levittowners have not yet become aware of how much they are a part of the national society and economy.

In viewing their homes as the center of life, Levittowners are still using a societal model that fit the rural America of self-sufficient farmers and the feudal Europe of self-isolating extended families. Yet the critics who argue about the individual versus mass society are also

anachronistic: they are still thinking of the individual artist or intellectual who must shield himself from a society which either rejects him or coopts him to produce popular culture. Both Levittowners and critics have to learn that they live in a national society characterized by pluralism and bureaucracy, and that the basic conflict is not between individual (or family) and society, but between the classes (and other interest groups) who live together in a bureaucratized political and cultural democracy. The prime challenge is how to live with bureaucracy; how to use it rather than be used by it; how to obtain individual freedom and social resources from it through political action.

Yet even though Levittowners and other lower middle class Americans continue to be home-centered, they are much more "in the world" than their parents and grandparents were. Those coming out of ethnic working class backgrounds have rejected the "amoral familism" which pits every family against every other in the struggle to survive and the ethnocentrism which made other cultures and even other neighborhoods bitter enemies. This generation trusts its neighbors, participates with them in social and civic activities and no longer sees government as inevitably corrupt. Even working class Levittowners have begun to give up the suspicion that isolated their ancestors from all but family and childhood friends. Similarly, the descendants of rural Protestant America have given up the xenophobia that turned previous generations against the Catholic and Jewish immigrants, they have almost forgotten the intolerant Puritanism which triggered attacks against pleasure and enjoyment, and they no longer fully accept the doctrine of laissez faire that justifies the defense of all individual rights and privileges against others' needs.

These and other changes have come about not because people are now better or more tolerant human beings, but because they are affluent. For the Levittowners, life is not a fight for survival any more; they have been able to move into a community in which income and status are equitably enough distributed so that neighbors are no longer treated as enemies, even if they are still criticized for social and cultural deviance. By any yardstick one chooses, Levittowners treat their fellow residents more ethically and more democratically than did their parents and grandparents.

They also live a "fuller" and "richer" life. Their culture may be less subtle and sophisticated than that of the intellectual, their family life less healthy than that advocated by psychiatrists, and their politics less thoughtful and democratic than the political philosophers' – yet all of these are superior to what prevailed among the working and lower middle classes of past generations.

But beyond these changes, it is striking how little American culture among the Levittowners differs from what de Tocqueville reported in his travels through small-town middle class America a century ago. Of course, he was here before the economy needed an industrial proletariat, but the equality of men and women, the power of the child over his parents, the importance of the voluntary association, the social functions of the church, and the rejection of high culture seem to be holdovers from his time, and so is the adherence to the traditional virtues: individual honesty, thrift, religiously inspired morality, Franklinesque individualism and Victorian prudery. Some Levittowners have retained the values of rural ancestors; some have only begun to practice them as affluence enabled them to give up the values of a survival-centered culture. Still other eternal verities remain: class conflict is as alive as ever, even if the struggle is milder and the have-nots in Levittown have much more than the truly poor. Working class culture continues to flourish, even though its rough edges are wearing smooth and its extended family and public institutions are not brought to the suburbs. Affluence and better education have made a difference, but they have not made the factory worker middle class, any more than college attendance has made lower middle class people cosmopolitan.

What seems to have happened is that

improvements and innovations are added to old culture patterns, giving affluent Americans a foot in several worlds. They have more knowledge and a broader outlook than their ancestors, and they enjoy the advantages of technology, but these are superimposed on old ways. While conservative critics rail about technology's dehumanization of modern man, the Levittowners who spend their days programming computers come home at night to practice the very homely and old-fashioned virtues these critics defend. For example, they have television sets, but they watch much the same popular comedies and melodramas their ancestors saw on the nineteenth century stage. The melodramas are less crude and vaudeville is more respectable; the girls dance with covered bosoms, but Ed Sullivan's program is pure vaudeville and *The Jackie Gleason Show* even retains traces of the working class music hall. The overlay of old and new is not all good, of course: the new technology has created methods of war and destruction which the old insularity allows Americans to unleash without much shame or guilt, and some Levittowners may find work less satisfying than their ancestors. But only some, for the majority's parents slaved in exhausting jobs which made them too tired to enjoy the advantages of suburbia even if they could have afforded them. On the whole, however, the Levittowners have only benefitted from the changes in society and economy that have occurred in this century, and if they were not given to outmoded models of social reality, they might feel freer about extending these benefits to less fortunate sectors of American society. But whether people's models are anachronistic or avant-garde, they are rarely willing to surrender their own powers and privileges to others.