A Rejoinder to Alex Schafran

by Michael J. Thompson

My initial argument in my brief article in the last issue of MONU on the anti-democratic dimensions of suburban life was meant as nothing less than a provocation. I am happy that Alex Schafran saw it as such and was prompted to write a response to it and the slim argument I presented there. But I should say here in my rejoinder to him that I was not presenting such an argument because of any lack of theoretical insight. Rather, I think that the relation between political theory, sociology, and space is one of the most crucial dynamics in modern social science and one that can, I think, illuminate new paths for research. But even more, the thesis that I present is one that has been overlooked by many contemporary urban planners as well as political analysts. This needs to change.

Let me state in more detail my argument once more before turning to Schafran's response and some of the familiar theoretical traps into which he falls. My argument is that the particular kind of spatial configuration of residential patterns which constitute suburban life promote a kind of detachment from others, reduce many kinds of face-to-face interaction, largely—if not entirely—eliminate the public square as a spatial center of gravity for the community, place undue emphasis on private property at the expense of public concerns, and become the spatial manifestation of social atomism that is characteristic of modern capitalist society. I make this argument theoretically, and recognize that there are some places which might not fit exactly into the model. I think that there is a distinct relationship between political ideology and cultural vitality on the one hand and density, diversity, and publicity on the other. Public life and democratic politics are, in my view, intimately bound to space and the built environment. This is based partly on the way that space structures and shapes inter-subjective relationships, but it also is tied to a broader socio-economic context.

The second part of my argument therefore consists of the fact that the suburbs mesh with the particular changes in economic and social life that have slowly occurred throughout the postwar period but have, I think, accelerated in the last 20 years. Namely, the fact that there has been a rise in economic inequality which has given rise to increased working hours as well as increased consumption. This has had the effect of confining most suburban Americans more and more to two institutions which are, by their nature in American life, largely anti-democratic: the workplace and the family. The lack of leisure time,

combined with the problems which they are indicative of suburban life (namely that of a lack of density, diversity, publicity) give rise to what I have called elsewhere a "new provincialism."(1) Of course, readers of urban theory will recognize some similarities between my argument and that of Richard Sennett who argued that suburban life emphasized privacy over publicity, and the "personal self" over the "public self." The dual result was the "fall of public man" as well as the rise of the "new puritanism."(2)

The issue of the move from community to that of atomism is also something that is intensified by suburban life.(3) This is also not a terribly new insight. Louis Wirth's seminal analysis of city and of community was premised in the definition of community as interde-pendence and communication. He argued that as this began to break down "we create interests units."(4) In other words, the breakdown of communicative, intersubjective social life breeds self-interest at the expense of public interest. The democratic element of local life therefore breaks down as well as the personal is premised over the public. The classic notion of the citizen which dates back to Aristotle's Politics which defined the good citizen as one who put the public good over the good of the minority or the one, vanishes. Since suburbs are based on segmented private property units by design, interest there-fore circles around this as the prime mover of political interest, sealing off larger social problems of inequality, segregation, and local funding for public goods.(5) As a former journalist in both urban and subur-ban areas, I can say from experience that it is this which dominates suburban PTA and town Board meetings: the narrow self-interest of property, not the larger issues of community. And this was, in part, by design: Dolores Hayden has shown how postwar suburbs "were delib-erately planned to maximize consumption of mass-produced goods and minimize the responsibility of the developers to create public space and services."(6)

But in the end, the evidence is clear linking political ideology and voting patterns and behavior to density and urbanity. Robert Lang and Thomas Sanchez have recently shown through an analysis of county data for the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections that the density of counties "explains 85 percent of the statistical variation in the 2004 Kerry county-level vote." In other words, "at each greater increment of urban intensity, Democrat John Kerry received a higher proportion of the vote. In a so-called Red state, such as Texas, Kerry could match Bush's vote in the center of the metropolis, and then lose by large margins at the fringe."(7) So it is not with "broad strokes" that I paint, but with a very tightly knit argument linking space, culture, social psy-chology, and the political.

The biggest flaw of Schafran's response to my initial piece—besides the over abundant reliance on anecdotal evidence to make his counter case—is that the issue I am raising is not one that glamorizes the city, but rather sees the suburbanization of America and its increase as having a deleterious effect on democratic life. I see this at multiple levels, as I have elaborated above, and I am able to point to statistical evidence to link density and diversity to democratic and liberal political ideology and voting patterns. My crucial point is that democratic politics, and democratic theory, needs to take note that democracy requires a "thicker" analysis than simply showing up at a meeting or participating in the local PTA. Democracy is a deeper mindset that has its roots historically in urban centers.

Schafran's claim that "[o]ur Jeffersonian democracy was built on small towns, open spaces and farming, and that rural character is undoubtedly ingrained in our national character" is patently false and has been debunked as far back as Richard Hofstatder's The Age of Reform. We do not possess a "Jeffersonian democracy" but a modern democratic republic which was deepened and made more tolerant through the urban experience, specifically the modernizing reforms of the Progressive movement, itself a movement from the city. It is Jeffersonian and Tocquevillian aspects of local democracy which have always lagged behind in terms of democrstic reform, and this is what dominates much of American suburban life. American progressive democracy was always an urban enterprise: abolitionists emanated from the New England urban centers, the influx of immigrants and their struggle for recognition happened in urban ghettoes and slums, and the Civil Rights movement was peopled by many northern students from urban areas. It was always the most reactionary character that came from the rural hinterland: John C. Calhoun and George Fitzhugh, to name only two anti-modernists and apologists for rural feudalism, were firmly planted in the anti-urban camp.(8) The anti-urban sentiment has always been consonant with anti-liberal sentiment. Anti-Semitism in Germany after WWI was highest in rural areas—i.e., precisely where there were no Jews; levels of anti-Semitism were lowest in urban areas, where people were exposed and knew the "other." It is no surprise that Nazis got most of their support from the rural areas and the ancien regime.

Historical examples of this abound. But I should say that this does not mean that my emphasis on the anti-democratic nature of suburban life did not mean a reliance on modern cities as they are currently constituted. The issue is, as Jane Jacobs pointed out, not simply density, but diversity as well. This has declined in the most urbanized areas in

the western world. Manhattan—where I live—has become a playground for the rich, lost diversity (economic and otherwise) and is, I believe, losing much of its cultural vitality. One can say the same for what is happening to London. But in any case, I am not opposing a "revolutionary city" to the drab suburbs: I am saying that cultivating density and diversity with equality and a new aesthetic of the built environment is what I am after. And this is something that needs more intellectual work, but to do so, a new critical account of suburban life is needed and its relation to democratic politics also needs to be seen. It is not that suburbs make people "mindless zombies" (Schafran's phrase, not mine), but rather that due to the factors I pointed to above as well as the lack of cultural vitality within suburban areas, consciousness narrows, intellect atrophies, order, insulation, and sameness prevails.(9) In such a context, I see no reason to point to a "revolutionary city" but rather that the suburbs may become—or have become?—the seedbed for a new provincial mindset that can, in time, infect the cities themselves via gentrification and its homogenizing effects.

In the end, I retain my initial thesis that suburban life constitutes a crucial explanation of the erosion of democratic life in America. And I think that urban planners and political theorists need to read one another—a fusion of sorts is necessary to overcome what may very well become the complete erosion of a vital democratic republic.

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(1) See the first chapter of my forthcoming book, Confronting the New Conservatism (NYU Press).
(2) Richard Sennett, The Fall of Public Man: On the Social Psychology of Capitalism (New York: Vintage, 1974) and The Uses of Disorder (New York: Vintage, 1970). Also see Philip Slater, The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970).
(3)This is an elaboration of Maurice Stein's insights in his book, The Eclipse of Community (New York: Harper and Row, 1960).
(4) Louis Wirth, "The Scope and Problems of Community," pp. 166–177 in Wirth on Cities and Social Life, Albert Reiss, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933).

(5) For an attempt at theorizing this aspect of suburbanism and democratic life, see Susan Bickford, "Constructing Inequality: City Spaces and the Architecture of Citizenship," Political Theory vol. 28, No. 3 (June 2000) pp. 355–376). Of course, there is also the economic theories of local public goods that point in this direction as well. See Charles Tiebout's classic paper, "A Pure Theory of Local Public Expenditures," Journal of Political Economy, October, 1956 (LXIV) as well as Joseph Stiglitz critical extension of this model, "The Theory of Local Public Goods," in, The Economics of Public Services, M. Feldstein, ed. The Economics of Public Services (London: Macmillan Press, 1977).
(6) Dolores Hayden, Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820–2000 p. 128 (New York: Vintage, 2003). Also see Lizabeth Cohen, A Consumer's Republic (New York: Knopf, 2003).
(7) Robert Lang and Thomas Sanchez, "The New Metro Politics: Interpreting Recent Presidential Elections Using a County–Based Regional Typology," Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech Election Brief p. 5. Also see Timothy Egan, "Battle for Control of the House Focuses on the Suburbs, Inner and Outer," The New York Times, Friday, June 16, 2006.
(8) For an interesting discussion, see Francis E. Rourke, "Urbanism and American Democracy," Ethics vol. 74, no. 4 (July, 1964) pp. 255–268.
(9) I once again point to Simmel here for the classic formulation, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in The Sociology of Georg Simmel pp. 409–424. Also see Roger Salerno, "Alienated Communities: Between Aloneness and Connectedness" pp. 253–268 in The Evolution of Alienation, Lauren Langman and Devorah Kalekin–Fishman eds. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).