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Charles M. Haar and Demetrius S. Iatridis, Housing the poor in Suburbia

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CONFERENCE

Strasbourg, 21-23 April 1976  
Written contribution presented by  
Dr. Jame Lambiri-Dimaki, lecturer in  
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Professor Trevor Smith with Miss Julia Bullock (United Kingdom).

book reviews

HOUSING AND SOCIAL  
INTEGRATION

Charles M. Haar and Demetrius S. Iatridis, *Housing the Poor in Suburbia: Public Policy at the Grass Roots*, Cambridge, Mass: Ballinger Publishing Co., 1974.

The authors of the present volume are convinced that «racial integration of the nation's residential patterns, most particularly through the location of low-income housing in suburbia... is the most crucial domestic urban issue facing America in the 70's» (p.1).<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, liberal reformers concerned with the problems of the American cities, have concentrated on the policy of opening up the suburbs to low income groups as a way of correcting metropolitan inequalities and reforming city ghettos.

Anthony Downs states the logic and the objectives of this policy in his *Opening Up the Suburbs*:<sup>2</sup> to house the urban poor in the suburbs, in small clusters, where they will be placed under the hegemony of middle-class values and they will adopt middle-class social and economic patterns, benefiting from access to the growing suburban job market, from special economic advantages, subsidies, etc., and from quality social services, especially schooling, available in the suburbs.

Iatridis and Haar provide a detailed exposition of the problems encountered in the attempts to implement this policy, in five different suburban settings. The

elaboration and implementation of this policy requires a complicated and intricate strategy, as spatial class segregation is the result of complex and inter-related political and socioeconomic processes of american capitalism:

• It would have to confront the attitudes and the preference structure of the urban poor and of suburbanites, that reflect their respective class interests (e.g., fear of a decline in property values and in school quality, fear of crime and vandalism, racism, desire to preserve «social distance», etc.).

• It would have to confront local political structures and raise the decision-making power to high levels of government. The multiplicity and large number of local governments through which suburbanites exercise their fiscal autonomy and exclusionary practices are a barrier to any effective policy implementation. The New York City metropolitan area alone has 1400 governments while Illinois' Cooks County has 457 tax-levying bodies. The need for regional planning and government is evident.

• Reforms can and have been obtained through the courts, in repealing «snob-zoning» and the existence and selective enforcement of building codes. Recently, the Supreme Court has agreed to review the issue of exclusionary zoning.

• Finally, policies must be devised to counteract the irrationalities and imbalances of the economic system and to redistribute resources (mass transit, job training, quality low-income housing, etc.).

Iatridis and Haar give us a comprehensive account of the intricacies of such strategies through the experience in the five case studies. By adopting a textbook format and by posing many questions in

1. It is questionable whether the issue is one of racial segregation primarily, and not one of class. It has been shown that suburbanization does not appear to vary with the proportion of the population that is black. See Bennett Harrison, *Urban Economic Development: Suburbanization, Minority Opportunity, and the Condition of Central City*, Washington: Urban Institute, 1974, pp. 77-8.

2. Anthony Downs, *Opening Up the Suburbs*, Yale University Press, 1973.

relation to the mass of information, they aim at exposing the complexities of the issues in terms of leverage points, the role and behaviour of actors and change agents, the effectiveness of various tactics and their interdependencies.

What emerges, is the difficulty of the problem and the multiplicity and complexity of factors that affect it. Ultimately, however, the limits of the policy are determined by the logic of this multiplicity and complexity. This logic emerges very clearly from the historical development of American cities. The attempts to understand metropolitan imbalances and inequalities as consequences of individual choices and maximizing behaviour, or of inefficient public policy, are inadequate. The problem is a manifestation of social relations. Economic processes and public policy have combined in assisting the exploitation of the inner city by the suburb. The inner city is left in a chronic fiscal crisis and the urban poor are locked up in it. Drained of its resources, it acquires the characteristics of an export economy: new jobs and the skilled work force move to the suburbs, housing is owned by absentee landlords, the fiscal base gets very weak, social services and schooling continually deteriorate, political control is lost to the suburbs.

Public policy has served suburban interests by confronting undesirable bottlenecks and irrationalities, such as the decline in profitability, commuting problems, lack of skilled work force

housing, loss of valuable central location sites, lack of safety, etc. Thus, 90% of all housing built under the Urban Renewal Program in the 50's has been middle-and-upper income; New York City has spent \$160 million per square mile of cleared land in subsidising the difference between the present market value of land and land value in its present uses.

The irrationalities that are developing suggest that opening up the suburbs and regional planning is not adverse to suburban interests. As an example, it was estimated that 150,000 blue-collar jobs were created in the New York suburbs in the 60's, while only 50,000 blue-collar workers found homes in those suburbs.<sup>1</sup>

It is in light of these interests that the design and implementation of these policies must be analyzed. The authors, correctly emphasize that local issues are only «the tip of the iceberg», and that the main issue is «the dynamic network of interrelationships between housing and other basic public policy issues... bearing directly on national-regional urban development, residential segregation, racial and economic inequities, redistribution of income-power-status-services, and national investment policies» (p. 283). Their contribution to the analysis of these issues lies in their formulation of a number of pertinent and timely questions.

YANNIS PYRIOTIS

1. «The Battle of the Suburbs», News-week, November 13, 1971, p. 62.

ΕΠΙΘΕΩΡΗΣΙΣ  
ΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΚΩΝ  
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