Ninth Edition

City Politics

The Political Economy of Urban America

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The first edition of *City Politics* was published in 1979, and since that time the book has undergone changes as profound as the subject matter with which it deals. To keep it current and relevant, we have always taken care to describe significant new developments both in the “real world” and in the literature of the field; in this ninth edition, for example, we include material on the recent debates over immigration policy, voting rights, the continued fiscal problems that cities face, and the urban impacts of inequality. In making these changes, we have included enough citations so that students will be able to conduct further research of their own.

Over the years, *City Politics* has been used in college courses at all levels, from community colleges to graduate courses in research universities. *City Politics* has reached across disciplines, too; it has found its way into courses in urban politics, urban sociology, urban planning, urban geography, and urban history. We have relied upon three elements to make it relevant to such a broad audience: a strong and original thematic structure with a blending of the vast secondary literature with primary sources and recent scholarly materials, new data, and our own original research. To make the complex scholarship of the field as accessible and interesting as possible, we build the book around an admittedly sweeping narrative. As far as possible, each chapter picks the story up where the previous one left off, so that the reader can come to appreciate that urban politics in America is constantly evolving; in a sense, past and present are always intermingled.

Three threads compose the narrative structure of the book. From the nation’s founding, a devotion to the present, the private marketplace and a tradition of democratic governance have acted as the twin pillars of American culture. All through the nation’s history, cities have been forced to strike a balance between the goal of achieving local economic prosperity and the task of negotiating among the many contending groups making up the local polity. An enduring tension between these two goals is the mainspring that drives urban politics in America, and it is also at the center of the narrative that ties the chapters of this book together.

The governmental fragmentation of urban regions provides a third dynamic element that has been evolving for more than a century. A complete account of American urban politics must focus upon the internal dynamics of individual cities *and* also upon the relationships among the governmental units making up urban regions. Today, America’s urban regions are fragmented into a patchwork of separate municipalities and other governmental units. With the rise of privatized gated communities in recent decades, this fragmentation has become even more complicated. In several chapters of this edition of *City Politics*, we trace the many consequences that flow from this way of organizing political authority in the modern metropolis.
We divide the book into three parts. Part I is composed of five chapters that trace the history of urban America in the first long century from the nation’s founding in 1789 through the Great Depression of the 1930s. This "long century" spans a period of time in which the cities of the expanding nation competed fiercely for a place in the nation’s rapidly evolving economic system. At the same time, cities were constantly trying to cope with the social tensions and disruptions caused by wave after wave of immigration and a constant movement from farm to city. These tensions played out in a struggle between an upper- and middle-class electorate and working-class newcomers. The New Deal of the 1930s brought the immigrants and the cities they lived within into the orbit of national politics for the first time in the nation’s history, with consequences that reverberated for decades.

In Part II, we trace the arc of twentieth-century urban politics. Over a period of only a few decades, the old industrial cities went into a steep decline, the suburbs prospered, and a regional shift redistributed population away from the industrial belt to other parts of the country. For a long time, urbanization had been driven by the development of an industrial economy centered in a few great cities. But the decline of industrial jobs and the rise of a service economy profoundly restructured the nation’s politics and settlement patterns; as a result, by the mid-twentieth century the older central cities were plunged into a social and economic crisis of unprecedented proportions. In the years after World War II, millions of southern blacks poured into northern cities, a process that incited a protracted period of social unrest and racial animosity that fundamentally reshaped the politics of the nation and of its urban regions. Affluent whites fled the cities, carving out suburban enclaves in an attempt to escape the problems of the metropolis. The imperative of governance—the need to find ways of brokering among the contending racial, ethnic, and other interests making up the urban polity—became crucially important.

Part III of the text focuses on the urban politics produced by the deindustrialization and globalization processes of the 1980s and beyond. The emergence of a globalized economy is one of its defining features. Older central cities and entire urban regions that had slipped into decline began to reverse their fortunes by becoming major players in the post-industrial economy. At the same time, the fragmentation within metropolitan regions has taken on a new dimension because cities fiercely compete for a share of metropolitan economic growth. Today, central cities and their urban regions are more prosperous, but at the same time more fragmented than ever, and one consequence is that social and economic inequalities are being reproduced on the urban landscape in a patchwork pattern that separates urban residents.

These developments can best be appreciated by putting them into historical context. As in the past, urban politics continues to revolve around the two imperatives of economic growth and the task of governance. As in the nation’s first century, cities are engaged in a fierce competition for new investment. The great tide of immigration that took off in the nineteenth century shaped the politics of cities for well more than a century. The intense period of immigration that began in the 1970s has yet to run its course, and it, too, will reverberate
through all levels of the American political system for a long time to come. Any account of urban politics in the present era will be greatly enriched if we recognize that we are a nation of immigrants, and always have been. The several new features incorporated into this ninth edition include:

- A comprehensive discussion of the bitter debates over immigration policy
- An expanded discussion of the controversies over voting rights
- New material on the fiscal crisis that still faces many cities
- An expanded and updated discussion of minorities and urban governance
- An updated discussion of recent trends in inequality
- Incorporation throughout the text of recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau

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Todd Swanstrom
Three Themes

The political dynamics of America’s cities and urban regions have remained remarkably similar over time. From the nation’s founding to the present, a devotion to the private marketplace and a tradition of democratic governance have been the pivotal values defining American culture. Finding a balance between these two imperatives has never been easy; indeed, the tension between the two is the mainspring that energizes nearly all important political struggles that occur at the local level. The politics of growth becomes obvious when conflicts break out over public expenditures for such things as airport construction, convention centers, and sports stadiums. Projects like these are invariably promoted with the claim that they will bring prosperity to everyone in the urban community, but such representations do not lay to rest important concerns about whether these are the best or the most effective uses of public resources. The fact that there is conflict at all lays bare a second imperative: the politics of governance. Public officials and policymakers must find ways to arbitrate among the many contending groups and interests that demand a voice in local government. The complex social, ethnic, and racial divisions that exist within America’s cities have always made governance a difficult challenge. A third dynamic has evolved in step with the rise of the modern metropolis over the past century: the politics of metropolitan fragmentation. During that period, America’s urban regions have become increasingly fragmented into a patchwork of separate municipalities. One of the consequences of the extreme fragmentation of political authority within metropolitan regions is that it helps perpetuate residential segregation, and makes it nearly impossible to devise regional solutions to important policy issues such as urban sprawl.

The growth imperative is so deeply embedded in the politics of American cities that, at times, it seems to overwhelm all other issues. Urban residents have a huge stake in the continued vitality of the place where they live; it is where they have invested their energies and capital; it is the source of their incomes, jobs, and their sense of personal identity and community. Because of the deep attachments that many people form for their local community, its continued vitality is always a high priority. Throughout American history, “place loyalty” has driven civic leaders to devote substantial public authority and resources to
the goal of promoting local economic growth and prosperity. In the nineteenth century, for instance, cities fought hard to secure connections to the emerging national railroad system by providing huge subsidies to railroad corporations. Today, the details are different, but the logic is the same: since the 1970s, cities have competed fiercely for a share of the growing market in tourism and entertainment, the “industry without a smokestack.” To do so, they have spent huge amounts of public money for such things as convention centers, sports stadiums, cultural institutions, and entertainment districts. These kinds of activities, all devoted to the goal of promoting local economic growth, are so central to what cities do that it would be impossible to understand urban politics without taking them into account.

The imperative of governance arises from the social, racial, and ethnic differences that have always characterized American society. America is a nation of immigrants, and for most of the nation’s history, anxiety about the newcomers has been a mainstay of local and, for that matter, national politics. Attempts to curb immigration can be traced back to the 1830s, when the Irish began coming to American shores in large numbers. Episodes of anti-immigrant reaction have flared up from time to time ever since, especially during times of economic stress. Ethnic and racial conflicts have been such a constant feature of American politics that they have long shaped national electoral and partisan alignments. This has been as true in recent decades as at any time in the past. At the metropolitan level, bitter divisions have often pitted central cities against suburbs, and one suburb against the next.

The extreme fragmentation of America’s metropolitan areas has its origins in the process of suburbanization that began unfolding in the late nineteenth century. For a long time, the term “urban” referred to the great cities of the industrial era, their diverse mix of ethnic groups and social classes, and their commanding national presence as centers of technology and economic production. The second “urban” century was very different. Increasingly, the cities of the industrial era became surrounded by rings of independent political jurisdictions – what came to be called suburbs. Beginning as early as the 1920s, the great industrial cities centers went into a long slide even while the suburbs around them prospered. Ultimately, an urban geography emerged that was composed of a multitude of separate jurisdictions ranging from white and wealthy to poor and minority, and everything in between. Recently the central cities have begun to attract affluent (and especially younger) residents and the suburbs have become more representative of American society as a whole. Even so, a complicated mosaic of governments and even privatized gated communities continue to be important features in the daily life of urban residents: where people live greatly influences with whom they come into contact with, their tax burdens and level of municipal services, and even their political outlook. Within metropolitan areas there is not one urban community, but many.

The three strands that compose city politics in America—the imperative of economic growth, the challenge of governance, and the rise of the fragmented metropolis—can be woven into a narrative that allows us to understand the forces that have shaped American urban politics, both in the past and in our
own time. Reading a letter to the editor of the local newspaper protesting a city’s tax subsidy for a new stadium (a clash of values typical of the politics of growth); walking down a busy city street among people of every color and national background (which serves as a reminder of the diversity that makes governance a challenging task); entering a suburban gated community (and thus falling under the purview of a privatized governing association, still another of the many governing units that make up the metropolis): all of these experiences remind us that there are consistent patterns and recurring issues that shape the political dynamics of urban politics in America.

The Politics of Growth

Local communities cannot be preserved without a measure of economic vitality, and this is why growth and prosperity have always been among the most important priorities for urban residents and their civic leaders. Founded originally as centers of trade and commerce, the nation’s cities and towns came into being as places where people could make money and find personal opportunity. From the very beginning, European settlement in North America involved schemes of town promotion. The first colony, Jamestown, founded in 1607, was the risky venture of a group of English entrepreneurs who organized themselves into a joint stock company. Shares sold in London for about $62 in gold. If the colony was successful, investors hoped to make a profit, and of course the colonists themselves had gambled their very lives on the success of the experiment. Likewise, three centuries later, when a flood of people began spilling beyond the eastern seaboard into the frontier of the new nation, they founded towns and cities as a way of making a personal bet on the future prospects of a particular place. The communities that grew up prospered if they succeeded in becoming the trading hub for a region and an export platform for agricultural and finished goods moving into the national economic system. For this reason, the nineteenth-century movement across the continent placed towns at the leading edge of territorial expansion:

America was settled as a long, thin line of urban places, scattering outward and westward from the Atlantic seaboard. The popular imagination has it that farmers came first and villages later. The historian’s truth is that villages and towns came first, pulling farmers along to settle the land around and between urban settlements.1

Each town was its own capitalist system in miniature, held together by the activities of entrepreneurs in search of profit and personal advancement. The restless pursuit of new opportunities encouraged the formation of what urban historian Sam Bass Warner has called a national “culture of privatism,” which stressed individual efforts and aspirations over collective or public purposes: “[The] local politics of American cities have depended for their actors, and for a good deal of their subject matter, on the changing focus of men’s private economic activities.”2 The leading philosophy of the day promoted the idea that by pursuing their own individual interests, people were also contributing to the welfare of the community.
On the frontier, the founders of cities and the entrepreneurs who made their money in them recognized that in order to ensure their mutual success, they would have to take steps to promote their city and region. Local boosters promoted their city’s real or imagined advantages—a harbor or strategic location on a river, for example, or proximity to rich farming and mining areas. They also boasted about local culture: music societies, libraries, and universities. And they went further than boasting; they used the powers of city government to promote local growth. Municipalities were corporations that could be used to help finance a variety of local undertakings, from subscriptions in railroad stock to improvements in harbors and docks. There was broad support for such undertakings because citizens shared in the perception that local economic vitality was absolutely necessary to advance the well-being of the urban community and everyone in it.

Today, support for measures to promote the local economy continues to be bound up with people’s attachments to place and community. Without jobs and incomes, people simply cannot stay in the place that gives life to family, neighborhood, and local identity. The environmental and social effects of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in the spring and summer of 2010 illustrate this point. As the disaster unfolded, it seemed certain that thousands of jobs would be lost in a long arc stretching from southern Louisiana to the Florida coast. At the time, tourism was expected to drop by half on Florida’s Gulf Coast, costing the state at least 200,000 jobs. In Louisiana, fishing, shellfish, and other industries seemed to be on the verge of being wiped out. When people talked about the disaster to news reporters, they spoke not only of the loss of livelihood, but also, with great emotion, about its effect on family values and community traditions—about the loss of a “way of life.”

No matter how calamitous, the oil spill was not likely to make coastal communities disappear overnight, no matter how hard it may have been to recover (fortunately, the long-term consequences of the spill were not as severe as many feared). People identify with the community within which they live, and they are often reluctant to move even in the face of genuine hardship. The resilience of community was illustrated in the 1970s and 1980s when massive losses of businesses and jobs hit the industrial heartland of the Midwest and Northeast. The rapid deindustrialization of a vast region threatened the existence of entire communities. The Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, region experienced a 44 percent loss in manufacturing jobs from 1979 to 1988, three-quarters of them related to steel. Unemployment levels reached as high as 20 percent, not only in Pittsburgh, but also in Detroit and several other cities of the industrial belt. Some people fled for more prosperous areas of the Sunbelt, but a great many of them elected to stay. Rather than giving up, in city after city public leaders took measures to rebuild their economies; indeed, in most places the cause of local renewal took on the character of a permanent crusade. Communities of the Gulf Coast reacted in a similar way. People resisted leaving; instead, they put their efforts into regenerating their local economies and strengthening their communities because they were not willing to abandon the traditions and cultures that brought meaning to their lives.
It might seem that the intimate connection between material well-being and community identity would leave little room for disagreement over the premise that cities must do everything they can do all the time to promote local prosperity. But this commitment does not always translate into support for every politician and developer’s bright idea or ambitious proposal. Disputes break out because policies to promote growth cannot benefit everyone equally; they are not always sensible or plausible; and there are always winners and losers. For renters and low-income residents, the gentrification of their neighborhood may bring higher rents and home values that ultimately force them to move. Growth in the downtown corporate and financial sectors may create some high-paying jobs for educated professionals but leave many central-city residents with low-paying jobs or on the unemployment rolls. A downtown that encroaches on nearby neighborhoods may benefit the businesses located in the new office towers but may also compromise the quality of life for nearby residents. People who do not care about sports may resent helping to pay for a new football stadium. Different perspectives such as these explain why there is frequent disagreement about how to promote growth, even though everyone believes that local prosperity is a good thing.

The use of eminent domain by local governments illustrates the kinds of disputes that can divide communities. All across the nation, cities have aggressively used their power to take private property for “higher uses” to make way for big-box stores, malls, condominium projects, sports stadiums, and a great many other initiatives. For most of the nation’s history, local governments have possessed the authority to take property without the owners’ consent if it serves a legitimate public purpose. Public officials have liberally interpreted this power as a useful tool for economic development, but homeowners and small businesses who find their property condemned so that it can be sold to a big developer look at it with a skeptical eye. On December 20, 2000, a group of homeowners led by Susette Kelo filed a suit challenging a decision by the city of New London, Connecticut, to cede its eminent domain authority to a private corporation that wanted to raze their homes. Things came to a head on June 23, 2005, when the U.S. Supreme Court upheld lower court rulings in favor of the development corporation. The Court’s decision ignited a firestorm of protest that swept the nation. In response to the public furor, by the fall of 2006, state legislatures in 30 states had enacted legislation to restrict the use of eminent domain, and hundreds of towns and cities had done likewise. In the fall elections of 2006, voters in 12 states passed referendums prohibiting the taking of property for private development if it did not serve a clear public purpose.

The lesson from the Kelo v. New London case is that despite the fact that almost everyone embraces the goal of local economic growth, sometimes the policies to promote it clash with other values, such as individual property rights, the health of a neighborhood, or a preference for less governmental intrusion. Everyone may seem to share the same interest in promoting the well-being of the urban community, but they frequently disagree over how to make that happen.
International migration is transforming societies around the globe, and the United States is no exception. More immigrants came to the United States in the 1990s than in any previous decade in the nation’s history, and the flow has continued into the twenty-first century. The social and political effects of large-scale population movements are often on display in big global cities such as Miami, New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, and in many smaller places as well. For this reason, in the global era, as in the past, city politics often pivots around issues of racial and ethnic identity and feelings of community solidarity at least as much as around issues of economic development.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, when colonial-era values still prevailed, men of wealth and high social standing made most of the decisions for the urban community. In the cities, “leadership fell to those who exercised economic leadership. All leadership, political, social, economic, tended to collect in the same set of hands.” Business owners, professionals, and aristocrats ran municipal affairs without challenge. The members of this social and political elite shared a mistrust of what Thomas Jefferson called “mobocracy,” a word he used to signify his opposition to rule by popular majority. Governance was remarkably informal. Local notables served on committees formed to build public wharves, organize town watches, and build and maintain public streets, and even the most essential services, such as crime control and fire prevention, generally relied on the voluntary efforts of citizens. Such a casual governmental structure fit the pace of life and the social intimacy of small communities.

By the industrial era of the 1850s, cities were growing at breakneck speed, and they were also becoming socially stratified and ethnically complex. Waves of immigrants were crowding into densely packed neighborhoods. They came from an astonishing variety of national cultures, from England, Ireland, Germany, the Scandinavian countries, and later from Italy and a broad swath of eastern European countries. From time to time, ethnic tensions rose to a fever pitch, and tipped over into violence time and again. In the industrial cities, the colonial-era style of politics could not survive the change, and in time, a new generation of urban leaders came onto the scene. They came from the immigrant precincts and entered politics by mobilizing the vote of the urban electorate. Their rise to power set off decades of conflict between wealthy and middle-class elites and the immigrants and their leaders, a story we tell in Chapters 3 and 4.

In the twentieth century, large movements of people continued to flood into the cities, but the ethnic and racial composition of these urban migrations changed dramatically. The immigrant flood tide ended in the early 1920s, when Congress enacted legislation that nearly brought foreign immigration to a halt. By then, however, a massive internal population movement was already picking up speed. In the first three decades of the twentieth century and again in the years following World War II, millions of African Americans fled the hostile culture of the South for jobs and opportunity in the industrial cities. They were joined by successive waves of destitute whites fleeing the unemployment and
poverty of Appalachia and other depressed areas, and by Mexicans crossing
the border to escape violence and poverty in their own country. These streams
of migration virtually guaranteed that twentieth-century urban America would
be riddled with violent racial conflict. One consequence of the rising tensions
in the cities is that millions of white families left their inner-city neighborhoods
and fled to the suburbs. A social and racial chasm soon separated cities from
suburbs, and echoes of that period continue to reverberate to this day.

A vivid example of the continuing racial divide was on display in New
Orleans in the late summer of 2005. When the storm surge from Hurricane
Katrina breached the dikes surrounding New Orleans on August 29, 2005,
80 percent of the city was flooded and nearly 100,000 people were left to deal
with the consequences. Wrenching images of human suffering filled television
news programs: 25,000 people trying to live under impossible conditions in
the Superdome, 20,000 more in the Convention Center, residents fleeing across
bridges and overpasses and desperately waving from rooftops. More than
1.5 million people were displaced, 60,000 homes were destroyed, and 1,300
people died. African American neighborhoods located on the lowest and least
desirable parts of the city bore the brunt of the destruction. The racial segrega-
tion that made this possible is a legacy of New Orleans’ past, and despite the civil
rights advances that protect the rights of minorities to live where they choose to,
it is a pattern that has not disappeared—in New Orleans or anywhere else.

In the meantime, bitter conflicts have, once again, broken out over foreign
immigration. The massive flows of immigrants in recent decades have made cit-
ies culturally and socially dynamic places, but they have also meant that ethnic
identity has continued to fuel conflict in national and city politics. The passage
of Senate Bill 1070 by the Arizona Senate on April 23, 2010, provoked a furi-
ous reaction across the country. The Arizona law authorized police officers to
detain anyone stopped for “any lawful purpose” if they suspected the person
of being in the country illegally. The legislation brought an outcry of opposi-
tion from many quarters, including calls for boycotts of Arizona products and
travel. President Obama decried the legislation, indicating that his adminis-
tration would protect the civil rights of all U.S. citizens if they were subjected
to state laws on the basis of their race or ethnicity. In cities with substantial
Hispanic populations, protests broke out against the Arizona law. The Los
Angeles and Chicago city councils passed resolutions supporting an Arizona
boycott, and other cities considered doing the same. On the opposite end of the
political spectrum, the controversy energized Republicans and conservatives.
Almost everywhere, the immigration controversy exposed a deep national divi-
sion that continues today.

The racial and ethnic complexity of metropolitan areas guarantees that the
art of arbitrating among the contending groups making up the local political
system will be hard to master. In the multiethnic metropolis of the global era, ef-
effective governance takes on real urgency. Governmental authority springs from
the obligation of public institutions to make decisions that are binding upon all
members of society. To retain the legitimacy to govern in a democratic system,
the government must seem sufficiently responsive to a large enough proportion
of the electorate, and at the same time there must be opportunities for the political losers to seek redress. The ethnic and racial complexity of cities makes this a daunting challenge.

The Fragmented Metropolis

Any account of city politics over the twentieth century must be located, in some part, within an often-rehearsed narrative that traces the decline of the central cities and rise of the suburbs, a period brought to a halt only recently by the unexpected revival of core cities. The process of suburbanization created the modern American metropolis, which is made up of a multitude of political jurisdictions large and small, wealthy, middle class, and poor. For decades, the basic urban pattern involved an extreme racial segregation, with most blacks living in central cities, and most whites—especially the affluent ones—living in the suburbs. More recently, the geography of the American metropolis can be more accurately described as a mosaic, with ethnic and racial groups scattered across the urban landscape. Despite the significant changes, however, suburban jurisdictions still differ sharply from one another, and the gap between the richest and the poorest is as great as ever. The fracturing of politics creates a dynamic in which central cities and suburbs compete with one another across many dimensions.

Today’s metropolitan regions are typically fragmented into hundreds of governmental jurisdictions. By 2002, there were 87,900 governments in the United States. In addition to the federal government and the governments of the 50 states, there were 38,971 local governments: 3,034 county and 35,937 sub-county governments, including 19,431 municipalities and 16,506 townships. The remainder, comprising over one-half of the total, is composed of special-purpose local governments, including 13,522 school districts and 35,356 special districts, each of them established at some point in time to take on particular tasks, such as the running of toll bridges or the building of sewer systems, or the financing of new suburban developments. In addition, special authorities by the hundreds have been created to finance and manage such things as convention centers, sports stadiums, entertainment districts, and waterfront developments. Every year more are added to the list.

The consequences of metropolitan fragmentation are too numerous to fully describe. Perhaps the most basic is that people tend to identify themselves with a local place rather than as regional citizens. Except when their team wins the Super Bowl or the World Series, most people have no connection to anything as abstract as a metropolitan community. This tendency is encouraged by the fact that political fragmentation and the local identity that comes with it serves some practical ends, and is especially advantageous for affluent suburban residents. Within all metropolitan regions, a vigorous competition takes place among jurisdictions for people and businesses capable of helping the local tax base. The winners in this metropolitan sweepstakes see the public revenues go up, which allows them to finance a higher level of services and more public amenities even if tax rates go down. This system of incentives prompts every local government
to adopt policies that benefit their own citizens at the expense of neighboring communities. Cities fight hard to outbid one another for big-box stores, retailers, and malls. They typically retain consultants to help them negotiate deals with developers, which may include a combination of eminent domain for land acquisition, land improvements and public services, tax abatements, and even direct payments. If successful, these efforts bring in tax revenues that support schools, police and fire departments, and other services and amenities, and they leave less for everyone else.

Another reason urban residents tend to identify with their local community (the “home team”) is that by keeping government close to home, they are able to make critical decisions about taxes, services, land use, and other important public policies. Historically, residents of suburbs have been especially concerned about maintaining the “character” of their communities, and frequently this concern has been expressed as a desire to exclude people based on race, ethnicity, and social class. In the history of urban America, strategies of exclusion have been aimed at a remarkable array of different groups. In the twentieth century, the desire to maintain racial segregation prompted suburban jurisdictions to enact policies meant to protect their communities from change. More recently, privatized, gated communities have become important means for accomplishing the same goal. These residential developments, which are often defended by gates, walls, and other physical barriers, are governed by homeowners associations that assess fees for maintenance, services, and amenities; in this way, the residents are able to separate themselves from surrounding neighborhoods and even from the municipalities that surround them. Affluent homeowners manage to achieve a remarkable degree of separation from the less well-off, and by doing so they have changed the contours of local politics almost as much as the suburbs did a generation ago.

The proliferation of condominium developments and gated communities has had a paradoxical effect. On the one hand, they have made it possible for people to live in extreme isolation from one another even when they are close by. On the other hand, they have facilitated a patchwork pattern of urban residence that breaks down the large-scale pattern of racial and ethnic segregation that once divided inner-city “slum” from affluent suburb. It is difficult, however, to tell if these spatial patterns make all that much difference to anyone except middle-class and affluent urban residents. A prominent urban scholar, Peter Marcuse, has proposed that a retreat into geographic isolation and fortification erodes a shared sense of community and citizenship. This is, perhaps, the inevitable consequence of the fragmented metropolis no matter what geographic form it may take.

The Challenge of the Global Era

Successive waves of immigration from all over the world have created the fragmented and multiethnic metropolis of the twenty-first century. Spatial fragmentation interacts with racial and ethnic diversity in complex ways. In cities closely connected to the global economy, symbols of corporate power, personal wealth,
and luxury consumption stand in stark contrast to neighborhoods exhibiting high rates of poverty, violence, and physical dereliction. Frequently, shocking levels of inequality are visible on the same block, a fact driven home when office workers walk by homeless people or stop to eat at an expensive restaurant staffed by minimum-wage employees. Highly paid professionals working in the global economy drive up the price of downtown real estate to stratospheric levels and lead the gentrification of nearby neighborhoods, leaving run-down areas behind. Gentrification and renewal have helped revive the fortunes of central cities, but these processes have also had the effect of fragmenting the urban landscape.

Likewise, metropolitan areas are fractured by a geography that reflects the inequalities and demographic processes of the twenty-first century. Political fragmentation facilitates a pattern of segregation that sorts people out according to racial and ethnic identity and social class differences. A historical analysis would suggest that there is nothing new about this. All through the twentieth century, the white middle class escaped the cities by moving to the suburbs. Now, however, the city–suburban divide inherited from the past is breaking up into a much more complicated metropolitan pattern. Ethnic and racial groups are widely distributed throughout metropolitan areas. The 2000 census revealed that more than half of all Latinos, almost 40 percent of blacks, and 55 percent of Asians lived in suburbs, and in many urban regions, the proportions were much higher. Many more suburbs than before are ethnically diverse. The problem is that ethnic and racial diversity of this sort does not add up to a more coherent metropolitan community. Achieving effective governance in such a circumstance remains as one of the unfinished challenges of this century.

Endnotes


