

City Suburbs: Placing Suburbia in a Post-suburban World, Alan Mace, Routledge, 2013, 196 pages, ISBN: 978-0-415-52061-4, £29.99 (paperback)

City Suburbs: Placing Suburbia in a Post-suburban World deals with the Anglo-American suburbs in the contemporary era, which many scholars characterise as “a post-suburban world”. One of the main goals of the book is to understand the dichotomous relationship between processes of suburbanisation and the practice of being suburban. The book brings in a fresh perspective to understanding suburbs in an Anglo-American urban setting, through the production and reproduction of meaning that suburban residents bring to bear on their place of residence. Therefore, the main argument that runs through the entire book is an understanding of suburbs as places in a relationship with the city and not as a separate entity.

Structurally, one of the high points of the book is that it is neatly arranged into separate chapters each dealing and building the author’s argument step by step. While the first five chapters (Chapter 1-5) provide the theoretical context of the work, the next two (Chapter 6-7) concentrate on empirical analysis of the case study of outer London where the author conducted his fieldwork. In the final chapter, a case is made to understand suburbs as relational space where residents carry out the meaning of suburbs through their experience of that particular place. Finally, the subdivision of each chapter into introduction, main body and summary makes this book very accessible to post-graduate students in early stages of their work.

The book opens with an interview of Prof. Sir Peter Hall. Prof. Hall’s work for five decades has been the hallmark among the scholars interested in studying cities. Here in this conversation he brings that to the fore, by discussing issues as varied as similarities and differences in suburbs across the world, urban studies in the present age of neoliberal globalization, and the challenges faced by urbanisation of London. This section is a novel approach, considering the issues discussed in this conversation made appearances in the book later.

In the Introduction (Chapter One), the author sets the scene for our understanding of suburbs as relational place between the city and the rural. As the title *City-Suburbs* emphasizes the relationship between the city and suburb, it places the suburbs in city-studies and the city in suburban studies. Another theme developed in this chapter focuses on the process of suburbanisation by emphasising the active work of suburban residents in creating, maintaining and disrupting the meaning of suburban place (page 22). This is done by employing Bourdieu’s schema of habitus, capital and field in order to look at the meaning-making of suburban residents. Although, the author developed Bourdieu’s approach in detail later in Chapter Five, the subsequent chapters (Two, Three and Four) developed in great details contemporary settings of the suburbs that include their relationship to both the central city and region. It also charts out in detail the changes (expansion and shrinking suburbs) happening across urban areas in the contemporary era which demands us to understand suburbs as relational place.

Chapter Three develops a historical analysis of the separation of city and suburbs, mainly from the perspective of an Anglo-American model. This chapter exemplifies the author's in-depth knowledge of the subject matter. Many times analyses of cities and urban regions have ignored the necessity to deal with the history of a place. An analysis of this sort highlights the differences arising out of historical developments in diverse urban areas. This theme is picked up again in the fourth chapter, whereby it is argued that instead of city and suburb separation which has been the legacy of Anglo-American suburbanisation, we need to understand how these differences are managed within particular suburban places. To do that, Bourdieu's work on habitus, capital and field is applied to investigate suburbs as a relational place based on residents' construction of the suburban. The critique presented here of Bourdieu's schema of habitus, capital and field certainly deserves merit for not simply taking his idea and applying it to urban studies, but maintaining the nuances inherent in the usage of his concept.

From there on the discussion in the book turns to methodological and empirical analysis. If the level of analytical framework presented in the preceding chapters is the strength of this book, the methodology needs more explanation. One is the use of Mosaic groups (Original suburbs, Asian Enterprise and Sprawling subtopia) which need more detail for the book to be more appealing to scholars of various disciplines. The geography of the study area, the data and its findings in general are presented very well throughout these chapters. However, the questionnaire used during the survey and the interviews, if added in the appendix would have helped to better understand what questions were put to the interviewees. If the book deals with the voices of the suburban residents then the questions used during the fieldwork would have definitely enhanced the quality of the work. One particular thing which is interesting is that Chapters Six and Seven represent a rich collection of quotes from the respondents, which makes the reading much more original and insightful.

The conclusion focuses on how people's practice impacts the experience of place when combined with the historical legacy. As good as this approach is in bringing suburbs to the fore in urban studies, it lacked the analysis of 'power', something which Bourdieu's maintains is a central organising principle of all social life (Swartz 2013). Bourdieu's discussion of habitus, capital and field calls for looking at expressions of power that radiate through interpersonal relations and presentations of self as well as in organizational structure. Thus, a critical understanding of power should help us understand the changing power relations in society. While *City Suburbs* is a discussion of suburban places in historical context, it did not incorporate the notion of power structure that affects the development of suburbs and the understanding of the residents of that place. Especially in the contemporary era of neoliberal globalisation, changes in urban areas are largely driven by capital and the agents of capital. However, the meaning-making of the suburban residents may bring about distinct characteristics of being suburban, it is also influenced by the political economy of globalisation. Except for this omission, this book is an important read for students and scholars of urban studies, town planning, geography, sociology and anthropology interested in the suburban experience.

References

Swartz, D. L. (2013) *Symbolic power, politics and intellectuals: the political sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

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