

## Book review

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Roger Keil, *Suburban Planet: Making the World Urban from the Outside In*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018; 258 pp.: 978-0-7456-8312-6, £13.50 (pbk)

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*Suburban Planet* is an intelligent and timely assessment of the contradictory trends in the current modes of urban production; ‘the urban age is in fact the suburban age’ as Keil frequently quips in the book. The work is also a much-needed endeavour to bridge the urban theory gap that started to emerge at the ‘postcolonial turn’, which as Keil claims in the book was occupied by academics from outside of the discipline of Urban Studies. However, in the introduction to the book Keil tries to distinguish his attempt from ‘the entire industry of Lefebvre scholarship’ as he calls it (p. 6). It becomes obvious from the number of citations on which he bases his argument that, in fact, the book borrows heavily from the ‘Planetary Urbanisation’ theory project (Brenner, 2014; Brenner and Schmid, 2015).

The central claim of this book is that while the majority of global urbanisation will, for the most part, be suburbanisation, we have collectively embraced centralism and compactness. Through a careful and sequential analysis of suburbanisation in the book, a challenge is presented to the mainstream discourse that often looks down upon suburbanisation. ‘The suburbs have

been studied as subsets of the city, rather than on their own merits’, Keil claims quoting Barbara Kelly (p.72). He attempts to understand suburbanisation as a planetary phenomenon by using Lefebvre’s (2003) ‘explosion’ metaphor (from the implosion–explosion analogy). He insists that while there are many different ways of referring to suburbanisation, such as peri-urbanisation, peripheral, ex-urban, etc., the phenomenon is universal. Furthermore, by differentiating suburbanisation from urbanisation the book attempts to rescue the object of peripheral urbanisation for critical analysis from ‘centralism’. The precise aim is to see the world through suburbanisation rather than as a world of suburbs. While the ‘suburb’ may only be a zone, ‘suburbanisation’ is the process of non-central population and economic growth with urban spatial expansion, and suburbanism is the suburban way of life.

The book locates itself at the postcolonial turn by abandoning the historically privileged spots for observing urbanisation, that is, the ‘Urban North’ and ‘the centre’ (city). In doing so, the author builds upon the ideas of contemporary urban thinkers such as Ananya Roy’s (2011) call for worlding practices, and embraces regional urbanisations. While the word suburbanisation may evoke imagery of the white picket fence, single-family suburbs typical of North America, Keil implores the reader to suspend this view and understand suburbanisation as a planetary process. However, contrary to its claim, the book falls into the trap of its own

critique. First, most chapters are based in North America and there are only fleeting references to the conditions in the Global South. The attempt thus appears to be one that looks for suburbanisation beyond the picket fence, instead of challenging the picket fence from experiences in less privileged geographies. Second, the book insists on deconstructing the term suburbanisation from its North American connotation instead of looking for a universal alternative that could very well have emerged in the Global South. In distinguishing extended suburbanisation (happening in industrialised Western countries) from primary suburbanisation (happening in the emerging world), the book also reifies regional imaginations of suburbanisation. This (suburbanization) will take wildly different forms in places such as China or Turkey, where more dense, high-rise type suburban developments are driven by large-scale state-sponsored programmes and (most of) Africa or India, where we see continued and continuous lower density suburbanization prevail. This reification defeats the book's self-declared claim that global suburbanism is a diverse, multi-scalar and historical process.

Taking on the challenge of bringing together experiences beyond the city in a comprehensive volume, Keil presents a spectrum of themes related to suburbanisation. From the imaginary of the suburb in popular culture, to its discussion in urban theory, suburban social movements and 'the right to the suburb', to the construction of biophysical and metabolic relationships through suburbanisation, and finally suburban politics, the spectrum of themes flow well into each other and are suggestive of how suburbanisation has been the foundational principle of urbanisation overall.

In the construction of theory for the suburban century, the book argues for the need to disassemble 'pathologies' of suburbanisation and the imagined centre (which is also

central to the implosion/explosion and centripetal/centrifugal dialectic). There has been an attempt to portray suburbanisation as an antithesis of sustainable urban development by the proponents of hyperdensity; the book attempts to carefully counter this claim through dissecting suburbanisation as a highly dynamic and differentiated process. The 'pathologies of suburbanisation' that have dominated policy research discourse in recent decades aim to either successfully deliver the suburb to the city, make it disappear or separate it as a space unfit for living. This critique of the sprawling suburbs, the book claims, emerges from the assumption that suburbs are uniform non-complex spaces that do not change and have largely passive residents. In doing so, it also attempts to differentiate the symptomatic critique of suburbanisation from the systemic. In attempting to dispel the myth of hyperdensity, Keil claims 'Density can be one of the best ways to concentrate wealth and power; and density can be one of the best ways to concentrate poverty and oppression (p. 159).'

The book successfully builds the link between suburbanisation as a consequence of infrastructure arrangements, and the 'right to the suburb'. Infrastructure, as the book demonstrates, can be understood as one of the foundations of building and understanding the urban periphery. The suburban infrastructural arrangements that Keil refers to include biophysical and metabolic relationships from which the city nourishes itself both as a mechanical and corporal entity. The suburban space structures around the networks, hubs and sites of infrastructure metabolism. As Easterling (2014) puts it: 'the suburbs are a 'zone', suburbanization is a horizontal division of labour, a giant production grid, a gargantuan spatial factory floor spread across city and society - enabled by networked infrastructures mostly. (p. 140).'

claiming the 'right to the suburb' the civil society constituencies attempt to mobilise around infrastructure issues, to either benefit from them or to avoid their adverse 'side-effects', such as the transit justice movements emerging in the North American suburbs.

Perhaps the most interesting juxtaposition the book produces is that of the original conception of suburbanisation through modernisation and modernism, towards the global suburb condensing as a bricolage of novel proportions. This juxtaposition builds upon the idea that suburbanisation was initially the domain of the modernist reformers in architecture (the Bauhaus style was a suburban intervention, for example) and modern architecture left its mark everywhere. From being the promise of egalitarianism, suburbanisation became a vehicle of ideological and material splintering of communities. The mix of form, function and socio-demographics of the global suburb is due to the innovative rearrangement of

existing and emerging urban fragments. Keil claims that immigrants bring aesthetics to the Western suburbs that become a part of the dominant vernacular, while in the Global South, the pieces of postcolonial suburbanities are glued together in a new landscape of formal and informal sub/urbanity.

## References

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