

Transforming Race and Class in Suburbia: Decline in Metropolitan Baltimore, by Thomas J. Vicino

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This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of an article published in

Sultana, S. (2010) *Transforming Race and Class in Suburbia: Decline in Metropolitan Baltimore*, by Thomas J. Vicino. Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2008. *Urban Geography*, Vol. 31(2): 273-274. doi: 10.2747/0272-3638.31.2.273

as published in the *Urban Geography* 2010 [copyright Taylor & Francis], available online at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.2747/0272-3638.31.2.273>

Abstract:

A review of the book “Transforming Race and Class in Suburbia: Decline in Metropolitan Baltimore” by Thomas J. Vicino.

Keywords: Book Review | Suburban Decline | Housing | Urban Development | Baltimore

Article:

The study of suburbs has been ongoing for over a half-century by many urban scholars, but this inquiry is usually through the lens of a single discipline. Thomas Vicino succeeds in synthesizing geography, history, sociology, political science, and public policy as he explains the decline of inner-ring suburbs in Baltimore over the past 30 years. Vicino begins by critically examining the history of the rise of the suburbs surrounding Baltimore, then expanding this history to include the broader United States, carefully detailing the life of these suburban areas and their more recent decline. It is this decline and the reasons for the decline that drives the book.

Following the delineation of the problem, Vicino continues with a particularly deft and succinct deconstruction of the suburb as a social and political construct. In less than 20 pages, Vicino recounts both the history of suburbanization in the United States and the most popular “push–pull” theories that explained the development of suburbs for most of the late 20th century. These “push–pull” theories are essentially rooted in modern economic and social status literature but, as Vicino notes, recent literature in this area takes a broader political view of suburbanization and, by doing so, is able to explain the suburbanization patterns of individual cities. The segue of political forces and the consequences of these choices are used as the entry into his specific discussion of Baltimore.

Vicino employs a combination of statistics, charts, tables, and prose to explain why the inner-ring suburbs of Baltimore have deteriorated over the past three decades, relative to the City of Baltimore and the outer suburbs of Baltimore. He is able to summarize these changes in four components. (1) He finds that population growth has stagnated in these suburbs and that the residents “were aging in place” and that families are no longer attracted to this particular housing stock. (2) He finds these residents have become poorer in relation to all other residents of the

Baltimore area between 1970 and 2000. (3) The relative value of the housing stock dropped during this period compared to all other areas. And (4) he finds that the average education of the residents in this area has dropped relative to all other areas as professionals left the inner ring. Vicino asserts these four elements of the inner-ring suburbs change little from place to place in the United States. In most cases, as in Baltimore, this ring is vastly residential in character, meaning that a diverse economic base does not exist, unlike that found in the major city's core.

Vicino also describes the physical and economic aftermath of the revival of city cores and the continuing economic and social drawing power of more far-flung suburbs ("exurbs"); these effects pull economic resources and vitality out of the inner ring and the inner ring has nothing left to offer young couples, or families. In the case of Baltimore, only the county has the economic might to make a difference. Vicino demonstrates that the singular Baltimore County government is the most positive advocate for these inner-ring suburbs. In other parts of the United States, economic devastation is greater in urban areas where the suburbs are a collection of smaller towns and cities, not merely a suburban zone of the larger city. These smaller towns and cities face a stagnant or shrinking tax base with all the negative externalities that emanate from the problem (e.g., failing infrastructure, rising crime). This political and economic Balkanization of communities is cited by Vicino as one of the impediments to successfully addressing and reversing the decline of other inner-ring suburbs around the nation.

Vicino's multidisciplinary approach, accurately and with detail, paints a human portrait applicable across the United States. The inner-ring suburbs of the Northeast, the furniture and textile mill villages of the South, or the manufacturing suburbs of the Pacific West have all succumbed to a similar decline. Vicino describes the spatial entrapment of elderly people living in what is becoming substandard housing. He presents a portrait of people who are trapped in a downward spiral as their property values fall, dragging down their meager nest eggs. Families are not attracted to this type of housing and singles are not attracted to the suburbs, so we see the aftermath of a market with no buyers—a downward value spiral. In these cases, Vicino notes that only significant investment from outside the impoverished community can begin to address the problem because the quality and nature of the housing stock is such a great part of the problem.

Vicino provides the reader with a broad primer and theoretical grounding—information required to form the foundation the reader must obtain to understand how he draws his conclusions. Also peppered throughout the book are charts and tables explaining the changing population, and economic, racial, gender, and family dynamics, as well as statistics of metropolitan Baltimore. He also tosses in pictures of typical inner-ring residential housing to give the reader a clearer idea of the nature of the housing stock about which he writes. Even his appendix contains his original research questions and a detailed map allowing the reader to understand Vicino's investigatory pathway.

The best aspect of the book is that Vicino does not shy away from detailing the history of the American suburb and the various theories that have accompanied the attempts to explain the nature of urban America over the past century. I appreciated his integration of social science disciplines and his willingness to directly include local politics (in the broad sense of the word) as one of the generators of suburbs. Vicino considers the political nature of suburbs with the

understanding that political decision making often races ahead of economic and social policy in the United States; recognizing that suburbs are sometimes an externality, the unplanned stepchildren of hasty political decision-making.

Transforming Race and Class in Suburbia: Decline in Metropolitan Baltimore is an excellent example of how to use a multidisciplinary approach in a specific investigation. Despite the seemingly arcane and almost misleading title, the book is fully applicable to suburban development across the United States and Canada. This is an excellent addition to the literature and makes for a top-notch addition as a text in the areas of urban development, geography, planning, and public administration.