WORKERS, SUBURBS, AND LABOR GEOGRAPHY

Introduction

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A large proportion of the world's workers live in communities on the outskirts of cities, what for the want of a better word we might call suburbs. In different places, such communities take different forms. Working-class districts composed of dense, high-rise dwellings ring many European cities, like Paris and Moscow. By contrast, in the United States, Canada, and Australia, working-class suburbanization has been characterized by single-family homes, low density, and automobile dependency. In Latin America, Turkey, and parts of Africa, sprawling self-built communities of shacks and shanties surround major urban centers (a phenomenon that occurred in some North American cities during the early twentieth century).

There has been little systematic, comparative study of working-class suburbs and their significance for labor movements and working-class politics, in spite of their obvious importance. The articles that follow represent a first step in that direction. In tackling the specific issue of suburbanization, the ILWCH editorial board also hopes to highlight the general fruitfulness of thinking about the spatial dimensions of labor history.[1]

Historians occasionally have considered how the scale and setting of working-class communities have shaped industrial relations and labor politics. Herbert Gutman argued that in the late nineteenth-century United States, workers proved particularly effective in fighting employers in manufacturing towns and small cities, because of the cohesion of working-class communities in such locales, the prevalence of cross-class ties, and the visibility of the "severe dislocations resulting from rapid industrialization."[2] Eric Hobsbawm looked at the other side of the coin in his far-ranging essay on "Labour in the Great City," analyzing how the economic, administrative, and physical structures of large cities have promoted and inhibited labor organization.[3] But such explorations have been few and far between. Although the community study has long been a staple of labor history, historians have been remarkably reticent in writing theoretically or comparatively about the significance of physical form and spatial setting for the culture, politics, and organizational structure of working-class life.

International Labor and Working-Class History
No. 64, Fall 2003, pp. 3–7
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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547903000152 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In recent years, other disciplines, particularly geography, have taken up this challenge. While historians roam the axis of time, geographers range the axes of space, and of late they have become increasingly interested in the spatial dimension of work and working-class life. Looking at workers and suburbs provides an opportunity for ILWCH to engage with this growing body of scholarship. To frame this discussion, geographer Andrew Herod provides an overview of what has become known as "labor geography," and considers its relevance for labor and working-class history. Geographers also have contributed two other articles in this issue, while another comes from two scholars trained as urban planners.

In the capacious way it is being used here, the term "suburbs" raises so many questions that its utility remains provisional. Can the favelas of São Paulo be meaningfully lumped together with New York's famed Levittown? Does it make sense to put government-built suburban estates in Britain and Ireland in the same category as self-built, single-family workers' homes outside of Toronto, or for that matter Istanbul? The differences among such communities are so vast that generalizations may prove difficult to come to, or extremely limited in their value.

But there are commonalities among the communities here being dubbed suburbs. Most are new, or at least relatively new, creations. Some working-class suburbs date back to the late nineteenth-century. Many, however, are only a generation or two old. Almost all sprang up far more recently than the cities they surround. Working-class families, moving to these new communities as pioneers, developed in them cultural, social, and organizational norms different from those in either adjacent central cities or rural regions from which residents originally came. Thus, as Kenneth Maffitt argues in his article on the industrial suburbs of Mexico City, suburbs, because they lack the weight of history, can provide fertile ground for the emergence of new working-class identities.

Home ownership often has been a component of suburban identities. Labor historians and social commentators, from Frederick Engels on, have noted how home-owning can influence working-class values and behavior, from the degree of geographic mobility, to strategies for economic survival, to attitudes toward taxes, racial integration, and political change.[4] Realtors and social conservatives have promoted home ownership as a way to deradicalize the working class. In the late 1940s, William Levitt, the developer of Levittown, pronounced, "No man who owns his own home and lot can be a communist. He has too much to do."[5] In her article on Irish working-class suburbanization, Ruth McManus quotes a Dublin clergyman making a similar argument two decades earlier.[6] Yet Richard Harris, in his overview of working-class surburbanization in Canada, the United States, Australia, and Great Britain, shows how, under some circumstances home ownership has pushed workers in a radical direction, while under others it has had the more widely noted conservatising effect. In the most famous left-wing suburbs, those outside Paris, dissatisfaction among working-class homeowners with an utter lack of basic services and amenities drew them to-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547903000152 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ward the Communist Party, as Tyler Stovall showed in *The Rise of the Paris Red Belt.*[7]

The political importance of working-class suburbs depends in part on their administrative relationship to the cities they surround. Large cities generally have been centers of national political power and labor influence. As Eric Hobsbawm noted, when working-class suburbs remain separate municipalities, as, for example, in the case of the "red belt" around Paris, their impact on regional and national politics may be minor. By contrast, when working-class suburbs get administratively incorporated into metropolitan centers, they can become enormously important in the politics of those cities and on the national stage. In both early twentieth-century Vienna, the subject of an article by Wolfgang Maderthaner and Lutz Musner, and modern Istanbul, which Murat Cemal Yalcintan and Adem Erdem Erbas discuss, new styles of politics, based in working-class suburbs, came to dominate the political life of the "great cities" to which they were attached, and to be highly influential on a national and even international scale.

Both union organizers and historians have recognized that suburbanization has huge implications for the labor movement. In study after study, historians have portrayed organized labor as having emerged organically out of tight-knit working-class communities, such as mill towns, mining camps, and urban, ethnic neighborhoods. In such settings, shared workplace interests and occupational bonds were reinforced by solidarities created outside the workplace, in neighborhoods, churches, fraternal groups, local political struggles, and recreational activities. Class identity and group solidarity were robust because they were created and recreated in multiple, overlapping, contexts. In many countries, though, suburbanization has disrupted this process.

Take, for example, the United States. Today, neighborhoods of workers who live, work, pray, and bowl together are more common in nostalgic speeches and retrospective studies than in lived reality. The majority of Americans live in suburbs. Many commute long distances to work and have only thin ties to their neighbors. New spatial patterns of work and home life, resulting from the development of the highway system, the growth of the Sunbelt, greenfield siting of industrial facilities, and suburbanization have made the kinds of communities once associated with labor solidarity unusual. "For an increasing number of workers," Hobsbawm wrote in 1987, decentralization out of cities "has snapped the links between day and night, or between the places where people live and those where they work, with substantial effects on the potential of labour organization, which is always strongest where work and residence belong together."[8] Suburbanization can accentuate the split in identity workers may have on and off the job, a phenomenon social scientists like Ira Katznelson long have explored.[9]

Of course, suburbanization does not necessarily involve increasing the distance between work and home, since some working-class suburbs are in effect suburban company towns that arose around outlying industrial establishments.

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Sociological studies of such communities in the United States, such as Bennett M. Berger's 1960 study of a working-class California suburb that grew up when a Ford plant moved nearby, have suggested that suburbanization per se does not have great lasting social significance, since it does not inculcate middle-class values among working-class residents.[10] But Berger studied heavily unionized workers living near one another, not the more typical case of nonunion workers, settled over a large area, often living quite distant from their plant or office mates.

Minna Ziskind's article about the efforts by one New York City-based union to organize suburban department store workers suggests that even when suburban workers live near their jobs, unionization efforts face problems in peripheral areas not encountered downtown. For one thing, spatial arrangements in the suburbs make it harder for union organizers to physically reach workers than in central city settings. For another thing, suburban workers often have different economic needs, work arrangements, and cultural values than their urban peers. Ziskind shows how the coincidence of the explosive moment of suburban growth in the United States with a period of political conservatism and pro-business labor-law reform checked the ability of unions to follow the urban labor force to the suburbs.

In looking at suburbs, the articles that follow bring into question common assumptions in labor history about the correlation between density and class formation, the importance of contiguity of work and home, and the relationship between property ownership and class identity. These articles by no means constitute a definitive look at workers, suburbs, and labor geography. Many regions, chronological periods, and spatial forms are not addressed. Nor are some very important issues, such as the links between suburbanization and racial and ethnic segregation. Much work remains to be done. Very basic information, such as how many union members in different countries lived in suburban, urban, and rural settings at particular moments of time, remains largely unavailable. As more and more of the world's working class comes to live in suburban communities, comfortable or squalid, the questions raised in this issue will become ever more imperative.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Adolph Reed, Neil Smith, Becky Nicolaides, and Helmut Gruber for their suggestions of themes and authors for this issue, and Vicky Hattam and Michael Hanagan for their comments on my introduction.

2. Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America* (New York, 1976), 211–60, and *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class* (New York, 1986), 70–92.

3. Eric Hobsbawm, "Labour in the Great City," *New Left Review* 166 (November/December 1987), 39–51. Appropriately, Hobsbawm initially presented this paper as the Herbert G. Gutman Memorial Lecture at the City University of New York.

4. Frederick Engels, *The Housing Question* (London, 1936). For an interesting, empirically rich study of this issue, see Matthew Edel, Elliott D. Sclar, and Daniel Luria, *Shaky Palaces: Homeownership and Social Mobility in Boston's Suburbanization* (New York, 1984).

5. Eric Larrabee, "The Six Thousand Houses That Levitt Built," *Harper's* (September

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547903000152 Published online by Cambridge University Press

1948), p. 84, quoted in Richard Polenberg, *One Nation Divisible: Class, Race and Ethnicity in the United States Since 1938* (New York, 1980).

6. Murat Cemal Yalcintan and Adem Erdem Erbas note a similar point of view among some Turkish government and business leaders in their article on squatters' settlements in Istanbul. For yet another expression of this view, and a dissent from it, see D.J. Waldie, *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir* (New York, 1996), 109.

7. Tyler Stovall, *The Rise of the Paris Red Belt* (Berkeley, 1990).

8. Hobsbawm, "Labour in the Great City," 48.

9. Ira Katznelson, *City Trenches: Urban Politics and the Patterning of Class in the United States* (New York, 1981). See also Katznelson, *Marxism and the City* (Oxford, 1992), and David Halle, *America's Working Man: work, home, and politics among blue-collar property owners* (Chicago, 1984).

10. Bennett M. Berger, *Working-Class Suburb: A Study of Auto Workers in Suburbia* (Berkeley, 1960). Scholars who agree, more generally, that suburbanization does not significantly change the sense of class identity among workers include Michael Zweig, in *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret* (Ithaca, 2000), p. 58, and Andrew Wiese, writing about the pre-World War Two era, in "Stubborn Diversity: A Commentary on Middle-Class Influence in Working-Class Suburbs, 1900–1940," *Journal of Urban History* 27 no. 3, March 2001: 347–54.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547903000152 Published online by Cambridge University Press