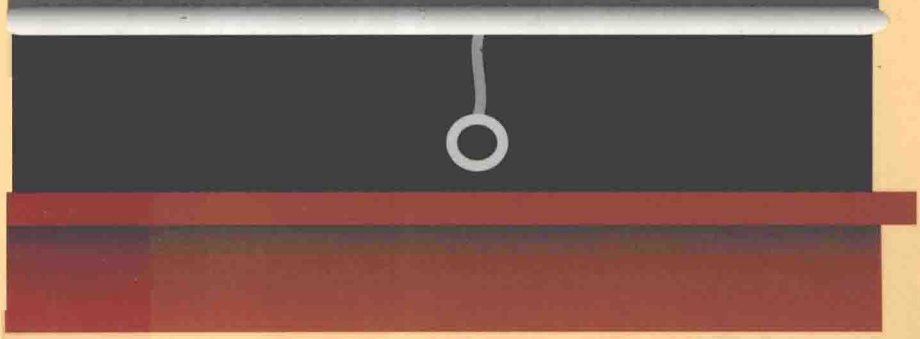
DAVID POPENOE

PRIVATE PLEASURE, PUBLIC PLIGHT

Urban Development, Suburban Sprawl, and the Decline of Community



With a new introduction by the author

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Preface

From a European viewpoint, the metropolitan areas of the United States appear shoddy and unmanaged. Looking beyond appearances into the social fabric of metropolitan life, the scene often is no more pleasant to behold. Urban and metropolitan areas in the United States have such social problems as juvenile deliquency, violent crime, and family breakdown in a magnitude far exceeding those of comparable areas in Europe. In comparative perspective, American metropolitan life has a marked vitality but also an undeniable pathos. How to account for the characteristics of U.S. metropolitan life, and their significance for contemporary American society and culture, are the main issues explored in this book.

The idea of writing this book evolved gradually during the 1970s as I annually shuttled between the United States and Europe on various research and teaching ventures. There is nothing better than such constant cross-cultural comparisons to bring into bold relief the conditions of one's own country and, given the diversity of European society, to check and check again tentative hypotheses that leap to mind. The research materials and observations in this book were developed over an eight-year period, starting in 1972 when I traveled with my family to Sweden for a year as a Fulbright scholar and visiting professor at the University of Stockholm. The many additional trips made later in the decade both to Sweden and to many other European countries included a six-month stay in England in 1978 at London's Centre for Environmental Studies.

But the true genesis of the book may well go back at least to the time I first became interested in urban and community studies, as an undergraduate, through reading Lewis Mumford's *The Culture of Cities*. Having grown up in a Los Angeles suburb, my appetite for comparative community studies became whetted, long before my first serious contact with European metropolitan life, through living in a small Ohio town, the central cities of Philadelphia and New York, and finally for the last several decades in Princeton, New Jersey. The major influences on the development of

ideas presented herein are much too numerous to detail, but they most assuredly include my teachers at the University of Pennsylvania, my sociological colleagues at Rutgers University and the University of Stockholm, and my wife and family.

I would like publicly to acknowledge and thank (while at the same time absolving them of responsibility for any of my failings) the following colleagues who critically reviewed this manuscript: Robert Gutman, Lyn Lofland, and Jeffrey Slovak in the United States; Anthony D. King in the United Kingdom; and Åke Daun in Sweden.

In a study as wide-ranging as this it is impossible to list all of the sources that bear on particular themes. I have therefore been selective, noting mainly those principal sources that have influenced significantly my own thinking and that at the same time may be of interest to the general reader.

This book grows out of an earlier one, *The Suburban Environment: Sweden and the United States (1977).* That work was a comparative study in the sociology of housing, dealing with the social impact of variations in housing and the built environment. The present study is much broader in scope, looking at metropolitan life in general, and dealing with a wide range of social issues. In addition, it brings in another advanced society, England, to further expand the comparative focus.

Introduction to the 2000 Edition

It is gratifying to see the degree to which issues of the urban residential environment have come to the fore in the American public debate since this book was written in the early 1980s. Perhaps because the Cold War is over and our economy is much stronger than it was at that time, social concerns once on the back burner are now subject to serious national consideration. Ask any American today about the public issues of greatest importance and the decline of community, with its concomitant moral decline, invariably looms large. Not far behind are the social problems associated with modern urban and suburban development, ranging from personal isolation and loneliness through family breakdown to delinquency and crime.

Nothing has made these problems more vivid than the highly publicized incidents of school violence, incidents that have taken place not on the farm or in the urban ghetto but for the most part in metropolitan areas, especially suburbs. Americans still find it hard to believe that such incidents could be taking place in modern communities, residential environments that are widely believed to represent the achievement of the American dream. But, in fact, as examined and evaluated in this book, these communities are not especially well suited to meeting human needs or achieving human desires. And the validity of this view, not only unpopular but even iconoclastic twenty years ago, has gradually been confirmed by recent events.

Since the beginning of human history most people have lived their lives in small close-knit groupings where feelings of attachment were strong and moral codes could be upheld by informal sanctions. It is reasonable to believe that such communities are closely in tune with our intrinsic human nature. With urbanization, people have come to live in residential environments that have virtually the opposite characteristics. In place of a community of intimates is a community of strangers, and in place of informal

sanctions is a removed system of formal sanctions. Families are small and often broken, neighbors no longer relate to neighbors, and a "sense of community" has all but vanished. Is it any wonder that people have become so worried about the moral situation of modern society?

Fortunately, new intellectual movements have come on the scene in recent years that point the direction to a better way of life. Foremost among these is communitarianism, an ideology that insists the good society is one where people have a rich community life with strong ties to others, rather than one in which a raw individualism takes over (private pleasure) and a sense of collective interest and common purpose is lost. That local community life should be revived, a central tenet of communitarianism, has now become infused in the thinking of both major political parties. Rejecting the highly centralized, top-down approaches of an earlier era, many of the current social policies of both Democrats and Republicans tend to favor locally based programs that seek to involve people in their home communities and rebuild local institutions.

Also, remarkably, "urban sprawl" recently has moved into the national debate. It is by no means clear what, if anything, Americans want to do about the issue. But many now recognize at least that there is a problem, and that uncontrolled urban development can be just as serious for human beings as it is for the natural environment. Governors have taken up the issue, the Sierra Club has made fighting sprawl its top environmental priority, and even national politicians are getting into the act. In the coming years it will be interesting to see what the nation is able to come up with in answer to the problems of urban sprawl.

In theory, at least, the general solution to urban sprawl can be found in another recently developed ideology called the "New Urbanism." Advanced by a small cadre of architects and urban planners, this ideology promotes the establishment of "neotraditional" neighborhoods and communities that try to recreate the main features of earlier American small towns. In late 1999, according to an article in *Time*, some 100 neotraditional neighborhoods were up and running in American with an additional 200 on the drawing boards. One of the leaders of the movement is quoted as saying that the goal of New Urbanism is to "build a public realm that will sustain the democratic life." Another has said, "this idea sells because conventional suburbia failed to deliver on its lifestyle promises." Although many New Urbanists may be unfamiliar with *Private Pleasure, Public Plight*, in fact they are following most of the guidelines put forth in the book's final chapter, guidelines that seek to generate a tighter social fabric and a stronger public sphere.

Yet it remains doubtful that such efforts can be promulgated widely enough to have a serious impact. What most Americans still have not ac-

cepted is the necessity for strong planning of the urban physical environment. Despite the fact that physical planning is an important and time-tested role for the public sector, the idea of government—even local government—planning has increasingly been dismissed in recent years. Especially in the area of urban development, as indicated by a do-your-own-thing mentality and a worship of the automobile and wide-open living spaces, the traditional American inclination toward libertarianism appears to remain strongly imbedded in our national psyche. This inclination can only be reinforced by our increasing social and cultural diversity, and by the growing heterogeneity of our residential environments.

The traditional American small town required little formal planning, although even there the degree of informal activity in pursuit of collective goals was often quite remarkable. But large urban areas do require central direction if they are to result in something that benefits us all, and in this America has fallen down badly. Although many now believe that the European welfare states have overreached in certain respects, few Americans return from a visit to Europe with the feeling that European residential communities aren't superior to ours in numerous ways, especially in their high level of public amenities and services. In the area of urban planning, as this book points out, there can be no doubt that the United States still has much to learn from the European experience.

David Popenoe
September 1999
Princeton, New Jersey

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Introduction

Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay.
—Oliver Goldsmith, *The Deserted Village*

Could Goldsmith's words, written two hundred years ago at the dawn of the industrial revolution, be prophetic of our own age? The societies of the West, having reaped full economic benefit from the industrial and urban developments of the last two centuries, may be at the dawn of another new era. Called by some postindustrial, postcapitalist, and even postmodern, the new era is designated by the office instead of the factory, the computer supplanting the machine, and the metropolitan area in place of the town and the city.

As in Goldsmith's time, many things today seem amiss. Especially in the metropolitan areas, where 75 percent of our population live, the United States is the crucible of problems that belie our affluence, our freedom, and our democracy. Social problems range from loneliness, anxiety, and divorce, through alcoholism, drug abuse, and delinquency, to violent crime. Lewis Mumford once portrayed the situation of metropolitan dwellers with words that must at times strike a chord in each of us: "Increasingly they find themselves 'strangers and afraid,' in a world they never made: a world ever less responsive to direct human command, ever more empty of human meaning."[1]

If the published statistics are accurate, these social problems are getting worse, not better. In the incidence of some of the problems, notably divorce, drug abuse, delinquency, and violent crime, the United States ranks at the top of all nations, both those developed and those still developing. In alcoholism, we rank near the top. And although statistical measures are not available for loneliness and anxiety, few would deny that these problems also characterize our times and our society.

What is the best explanation for this state of affairs? Why is it that with

all our affluence and opportunities, our world ranking on a social problems index is so high? In the American world of intellectual discourse today, there is no shortage of explanations. One is that there has been a decline in religion; it is felt that the enemy is "secular humanism," something that must be rooted out in favor of traditional religious practices. Another is that the rise of the welfare state has sapped our economic motivation as well as our moral strength. We have become a nation of spoiled citizens, waiting for government handouts and unwilling to do a day's work. Partisans of this position feel that great gains can be made by undoing the welfare state, by taking government out of our lives. Then there are those who argue, like Goldsmith, that affluence itself is the cause; the rich always evince depravities from which the poor, in their nobility, are immune. A common answer proferred by those who hold this view is that we turn back the technological clock, and perhaps retreat to the woods with "four acres and independence." Still others believe that the fault lies in the distribution of income; if somehow we could achieve real economic equality our problems would disappear. Egalitarians urge a much more extensive welfare state than we have today. Finally, many would argue that our problems stem from our relatively high population diversity. It is impossible, they maintain, for a nation with so many ethnic and racial groups ever to be a placid and orderly society; the best we can do is to "pull up the gangplank" and prevent the future exacerbation of our current problems.

Each of these explanations is not without plausibility. But it should be pointed out that most have to a rather large degree the character of partisan pleadings of special interest groups; of religionists, of wealthy businessmen, of drop-outs, of civil servants, and of those who feel that their comfort is impeded by the diversity of the population. The answer to the plight of modern civilization is a good bit more complex than any of these explanations suggests.

The purpose of this book is to add to but also to sharpen the intellectual debate about the social problems of contemporary metropolitan life in the United States. My view is that the actions of human beings are to a significant degree shaped by their social surroundings, especially those social relationships in which people through their daily lives are embedded. In this book I explore sociologically the genesis of social problems in the underlying fabric of life in metropolitan communities, the social structures and environments in which most of us lead our everyday lives. Could it be that the very character of the community environments in which we live is a major contributor to our woes?

The study of social problems—their causes, conditions, and consequences—has been the main raison d'être of the discipline of sociology since its inception. Although I have not hesitated to venture far outside the

field when necessary, my academic perspective is that of urban sociology. The traditional concern of urban sociology has been the relationship between "settlement patterns" and "social structure," that is, between characteristics of such locality groupings as neighborhoods, towns, cities, and metropolitan areas, and the nature of social life within these groupings.[2] It is this relationship that is explored throughout this work. How does the character of metropolitan communities—social bonds, cultural patterns, population density and scale, modes of transportation and communication, interpersonal networks—affect the everyday lives of metropolitan residents? What are the effects, for example, on family relationships, use of leisure time, and the sense of well-being?

The main thesis developed in the following pages is that life in metropolitan communities has become overly privatized. In our single-minded pursuit of private pleasure we have severely undercut the public ties upon which successful communities depend. As human communities, metropolitan areas are fragmented, amorphous, impersonal, and unsupportive of many basic human endeavors. Although not always obvious, the human consequences of this social condition are a cause for some alarm. To paraphrase Oliver Goldsmith, when communities decay, men decay.

The Comparative Perspective

The thesis of "community decline" in urban settings has been one of the traditional theses in urban sociology, surrounded by debate and not without its strong academic detractors. A contribution of this study is the cross-cultural exploration of the thesis, and examination of it against the broad canvas of metropolitan life in several different societies. My attempt has been to place the American condition in perspective, to look for both American uniqueness and commonalities between our condition and that of other advanced societies.

Cross-societal comparisons are no longer unfamiliar to most Americans. With a sudden intensity we are looking more to the rest of the world for knowledge, for answers, and even for reassurance. A big focus of attention today, for example, is on the American work environment. Something there seems to be wrong, causing falling productivity and high unemployment. So we are straining our necks to find out what is going on in Japan, where work organizations operate very differently and with apparently far more success.

Yet there is another environment in people's lives, the residential environment, that is at least as important. Indeed, the majority of Americans—men, women, and children—do not work, but they do spend much of the day and all of the night in a residential environment (and those who

do work typically value most their time spent at home). If something is wrong with our work environments by the standard of comparison with other countries, perhaps something is wrong with our residential environments as well. Could not our metropolitan areas suffer from a failure of social productivity analogous to the workplace's failure of economic productivity?

The importance of comparative analysis comes quickly into view in a consideration of the traditional explanations mentioned above for the American social malaise, such as the decline of religion, too much affluence, and an excessive welfare state. In the search for evidence to support these explanations, should one not ask at the outset: How does the United States differ in these respects from other advanced societies? A brief survey of the dozen or so societies that make up the world's urban-industrial vanguard would quickly turn up the fact that some have much less religion than we do (Sweden), more welfare state provisions (the Netherlands), greater affluence (Switzerland), more economic insecurity (Great Britain), and a higher population diversity (Belgium). Yet these societies do not have social problems of the magnitude found in the United States. In its problems, and its social conditions, is this society unique in ways that set it quite apart from the rest of the industrialized world? Are we the captive, at an advanced stage, of social trends that will soon overtake every modern society? The only way to find answers to such fundamental questions is through cross-national comparative inquiry.

In a recent article in the *American Journal of Sociology*, Cambridge University sociologist Anthony Giddens issued a "clarion call for a revitalized comparative sociology of advanced societies." "We should abandon the practice, which would in any case scarcely be defended by anyone in principle, of constructing theories of development on the basis of single cases."[3] In this admonition, he is in step with a strong trend toward cross-national comparative studies that can be seen emerging in American sociology today, and that has been in evidence for some years in the European branches of the discipline.

The trend toward cross-national comparative studies represents in some ways a return to the approach that dominated the discipline's founding fathers, especially Max Weber. Indeed, Weber's *The City* (1921), an historical and cross-cultural analysis of urban life, is one of the classics of urban sociology and urban studies. The disciplinary focus of American sociology for much of the twentieth century, in contrast, has been much more narrowly conceived, and the historical and cultural sweep of life and events has largely been put aside. Yet I think it is reasonable to say that the move today toward wider intellectual horizons represents not so much a conscious attempt to return to the vision of the founding fathers as it does a

natural evolution of a young discipline. American sociology is beginning to grow beyond its parochialism; as the knowledge of American life becomes ever more refined, the search almost of necessity turns to wider angles of vision. It may be no coincidence that this evolution of a discipline comes at a time when the advanced nations of the world, as never before and despite their many differences, have a growing sense of themselves as a single economic if not also a social and political unity. Certainly they now have a sense that their fate is a common one, one that overrides national differences.

Two societies have been chosen for direct comparison in this book with the United States: Great Britain and Sweden. Although differing in societal scale and in other important respects to be discussed below and in following chapters, these nations, along with the United States, are among the most advanced societies in the world in terms of urban industrialism, that set of social forces that has been the most powerful engine of change in the modern world. If urban-industrial development can be conceived as a unitary and evolutionary process, each of these nations today stands at about the same level of development, albeit there are leads and lags of some significance. Great Britain was the earliest nation to achieve urban-industrial prominence, the world's pioneer in this respect; the United States is the most powerful of the world's urban-industrial societies; and Sweden is probably the world's most successful urban-industrial society, as measured in terms of standard of living as well as the minimization of the negative effects of urban and industrial growth.

In addition to their advanced level of urban industrialism, the three nations are probably the most similar of the advanced societies in basic dimensions of culture and social structure. Each is a highly pragmatic and rational society that emphasizes efficiency and practicality. And each is world renowned for political stability and the practice of democracy, and for the strength of its social and economic institutions. The three societies also bear a striking resemblance in the degree to which their dominant societal goals are economic growth and the advancement of material well-being, but in this respect they are little different from almost all other societies in the world today.

For comparative analysis, however, it is the differences and not the similarities that command one's attention. Sweden is a relatively homogeneous society with a small population, about 8 million, which contrasts with the diverse United States population of 232 million (Britain falls in between, with about 56 million). More important still, in looking at urban-industrial life in these three advanced societies, one is struck immediately by the remarkable differences in the physical setting of their urban and metropolitan areas.

How could three such similar societies, at the same level of urban and industrial development, have evolved urban areas as dissimilar as Stockholm, London, and Chicago (New York is very atypical of the United States), or Gothenburg (Sweden's second city), Liverpool, and Dallas? It does not seem logically to follow from Sweden's great wealth, high rate of automobile ownership (the highest in Europe), and large amount of available land for urban development, that that nation should have what is probably the most compact metropolitan living pattern among Western societies, with most residents living in small apartments and relying on public transportation and other publicly provided services. Wealth, automobiles, and land typically are associated with the United States metropolitan pattern, the most dispersed in the world, where most residents live in single-family, detached houses and rely on private automobiles and a great variety of private services. Nor do the differences in metropolitan setting seem related to the population size difference between the two nations.

One might expect to find Sweden's compact and high-density metropolitan environment in Britain, the tight little island. Instead, the English urban pattern is more American than it is European, with many people living in detached or semidetached houses, and with metropolitan areas built, as a consequence, at relatively low densities. On a range from compact to dispersed metropolitan form, apartment to single-family-house living, and public to private services, Sweden and the United States are at the two extremes, and England is just about in the middle.

Sweden and Great Britain were picked for comparison with the United States, then, because although similar in many fundamental respects, they represent the full range of metropolitan development in advanced societies. Moreover, they express the continuum of Western economic and political systems ranging from relatively free market capitalism to welfare capitalism. (As we shall see, metropolitan development and type of political and economic system are by no means unrelated.)

Especially in the United States, the terms *urban* and *metropolitan* often are associated with the lower—or under—classes and with minority groups. This association is not as strong in the European context. In Sweden, for example, center-city dwellers tend to be considerably wealthier than other members of the society, and until the last few decades, minority groups in Swedish cities did not exist. Partly for reasons of comparability, therefore, I have limited this study to a comparison of the "middle mass" of metropolitan citizens, those who make up the stable working and middle classes. In the United States more than 70 percent of metropolitan residents can be classified as belonging to these classes, and the percentage for the European countries may be even higher. This is not a book on urban

poverty or race relations, however important those topics may be. Nor does it dwell very long on the upper-class urbanites in each nation. The latter—residents of Park Avenue, Grosse Point, and Beverly Hills in the United States—may provide a model for many urban dwellers to try to emulate, but it is no more than a model, and one often far removed from the typicality of metropolitan life.

An Urban Turning Point?

Urban dwellers in advanced societies are currently witnessing what may be a major turning point in urban history. During the 1970s and at first largely unnoticed by ordinary citizen and urban specialist alike, there occurred a significant social event: the decline of the great period of postwar urbanization in advanced societies. This decade saw the termination of the postwar housing shortage in Sweden as the building of apartments finally caught up with demand. It saw the end of New Town building in Britain as the focus of urban development turned back again to central-city areas. And it saw a curtailing of the great, postwar suburban development boom in the United States, to such a degree in fact that some were decrying the loss for most people of the realization of the long-standing American dream of a suburban house.[4]

These events were closely associated with urban demographic changes that were most visible in the United States but were paralleled in the other advanced countries. For the first time in United States history, many of our metropolitan areas stopped growing. The older cities have been losing population for many decades, some since near the turn of the century. And millions of Americans have lived for a while in center cities, only to soon leave for the metropolitan periphery. But never before was there a time in United States history when metropolitan areas did not show a larger population at the end of a decade than they had as its beginning.[5]

Not all metropolitan areas are in decline. Areas in the Sunbelt especially are growing almost as fast as ever. Moreover, many new metropolitan areas are in the process of formation. But there is reason to hold, nonetheless, that in the 1970s the United States reached a watershed of urbanization: from being an ever-urbanizing society it evolved into a society in which there was a significant movement of people away from metropolitan areas. In general, the larger the metropolitan area, the steeper was the decline in its population.

Metropolitan development and metropolitan life may in the future be quite different from what they are today. Before the next wave of community building begins it seems essential to think more seriously, based on present and past experience, about how we might want to change the social

character of future communities. To do this we first must take careful stock of the social conditions of contemporary metropolitan life.

The Plan of This Book

Part I begins with a brief review of the historical emergence of metropolitan areas in each nation, emphasizing the immense changes in community life that followed the industrial revolution in England. The remarkable diversity among the metropolitan settings in Sweden, Great Britain, and the United States is discussed in Part II. These settings provide an entree to the social worlds of metropolitan areas. Are the variations in physical setting related to similar variations in metropolitan ways of life and community structure? Are the variations in ways of life and community structure as great, and as significant, as the variations in setting? These are the issues considered in Part III.

In the final part of this book I present an interpretation of life and change in the metropolitan community. Using the materials in Parts II and III as an empirical grounding, I assess metropolitan culture as a whole, emphasizing the social trends that have generated massive privatization together with their human consequences. To conclude, the implications of this analysis for urban social policy in the United States are put forth, with suggested goals for urban community development in the future.

Notes

1. Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), p. 546.
2. See Claude S. Fischer, "On the Marxian Challenge to Urban Sociology," *Comparative Urban Research* 6, nos. 2, 3, (1978): 10-19; and Claude S. Fischer, "The Study of Urban Community and Personality" in *Annual Review of Sociology,* ed. Alex Inkeles et al. (Palo Alto: Annual Review, 1975), pp. 67-89.
3. Anthony Giddens, "Classic Social Theory and the Origins of Modern Sociology" *American Journal of Sociology* 81 (1976): 722.
4. George Sternlieb, "Death of the American Dream House," *Society*, February 1972, pp. 39-42.
5. This trend was first identified in the early 1970s by Calvin Beale of the U.S. Bureau of the Census. For an early statement, see Peter A. Morris and J.P. Wheeler, *Rural Renaissance in America?* (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, 1976).