

A Critique of the Culture of Critiquing the Culture of Sprawl

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PART I: THE CULTURED SOCIAL SCIENTIST

Societies can be simplified, categorized, and dichotomized in a variety of ways. Any broad classification system for human beings is inherently flawed by oversimplification, yet such simplifications are necessary in order to discuss and theorize about a society. Social problems are often framed as a tension between supposedly definable and oppositional categories such as rich and poor, liberal and conservative, religious and secular, etc. Though incomplete, these frameworks can be useful to help conceptualize complex issues. One such dichotomy that is potentially useful is the categorization of people as cultured or uncultured.

Culture is a concept commonly understood, but difficult to define. A complicating factor is that the word has various meanings in different contexts. It is used to describe completely unrelated concepts depending on context: an anthropologist, an art critic, a microbiologist, and a farmer all have drastically different meanings for culture. Even social scientists rarely reflect on variations of meaning when referring to an ethnic culture, national culture, culture of poverty, culture of sprawl, etc. This essay attempts to analyze the word as used to refer to a cultured man. In this context, culture is defined by Merriam-Webster as:

- a: enlightenment and excellence of taste acquired by intellectual and aesthetic training
- b: acquaintance with and taste in fine arts, humanities, and broad aspects of science as distinguished from vocational and technical skills

The formal definition demonstrates the elusiveness of the concept. Who is qualified to recognize excellence of taste? What is meant by enlightenment achieved through aesthetic training? If indoctrination is defined as in Merriam-Webster, “to imbue with a usually partisan or sectarian opinion, point of view, or principle,” is indoctrination not also aesthetic

training? Finally, if aesthetic training is required for enlightenment – and thus culture – what is the distinction between a cultured man and an indoctrinated man?

The distinction between acculturation and indoctrination is fuzzy, but fundamental. The difference is determined solely by the prevalence of a priori (independent of experience) consideration inherent in the learning process in the Kantian sense of a transcendental knowledge of the good. If a priori consideration is absent, the education is indoctrination. In pure indoctrination, the individual automatically accepts the tacit assumptions on which any further knowledge is predicated. Thus, “an educated man is not necessarily a cultured man.”¹ In acculturation, by contrast, learned concepts and behaviors are constantly challenged by the individual; not only in formal method, but in a priori reflection.

Humanist anthropologist Ashley Montagu, in *The Cultured Man* (1958), recognizes such a distinction between the processes of acculturation and indoctrination:

“The process of making a cultured man does not depend on the transmission of knowledge, but upon the manner in which that knowledge is transmitted by the teacher. The teacher who is enthusiastic about teaching is likely to imbue his teaching with an infectious enthusiasm for the art of sound thinking; he will stimulate the imagination to soar but also to remain in control, he will increase the sensibilities of his students toward the appreciation of beauty and the will to contemplatively approach the mysteries that surround us; he will encourage the student to allow his imagination to play freely upon what he is learning: such a teacher will contribute toward the making of a cultured man, rather than a technician.”²

1 Montagu 1958, 9

2 Montagu 1958, 62

Montagu further distinguishes the qualities of a cultured man from that of a “civilized man,” though the two may be outwardly indistinguishable. Montagu posits that an educated/ civilized man remains uncultured if he is not predisposed to challenge the virtues of his knowledge:

“The civilized man naturally adopts the values, that is to say those qualities that are considered to be virtues, of his particular State as they are reflected in the practices of a particular town in which he happens to have his being. In the course of acquiring those local civilized virtues he may fail to achieve them with any accompaniment of refinement and with little or no humanity.”³

Thus, a cultured man and a learned man may outwardly exhibit the same mannerisms, breadth, and depth of knowledge. The crucial difference is the a priori consideration and reconsideration of accepted knowledge and conventional wisdom in the mind of the cultured man, what Montagu calls “humanity.” This difference implies a distinctively different cognitive map – a mental model of the world – in the minds of the cultured versus the uncultured. Montagu quotes philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, who succinctly defines culture as “activity of thought, and receptiveness to beauty and humane feeling.”⁴ Montagu hypothesizes that every human being may have an inherent capacity for acculturation.⁵ He subsequently admits he may be wrong, but maintains that it is an experiment worth attempting.

A concerted effort towards a wholly cultured society is a noble goal, but doubtfully attainable. We are not born blank slates. Individual human beings are genetically predisposed to distinct patterns of thought,⁶ and it is possible that some may be incapable of acculturation. Even if Montagu is correct in thinking that every human being is born with a capacity for acculturation, this capacity may easily be quashed in early childhood as an individual’s cognitive map takes shape. While the human mind is amazingly adaptable, most of our habits of thought are set very early on in life.⁷

Others who may be capable of such thought patterns may

3 Montagu 1958, 28

4 Quoted in Montagu 1958, 40

5 Montagu 1958, 32

6 Pinker 2002

7 Wright 1994

never be inspired to develop them, as acculturation is not necessary in coping with the typical tasks and challenges of daily life.

When we formally consider our world and society, we often rely on theories that have been formulated by professional academics in the fields of humanities and social sciences. These fields are generally abstract and interconnected, requiring the constant challenging of accepted norms. As this requirement for abstract analytical thought is combined with the relatively meager average salary for professional social scientists (which implies that most seek knowledge for knowledge’s sake), we find that this field is composed primarily of individuals from the minority of humanity who are not only acculturable, but fully cultured. Because professional academic social scientists are highly predisposed to be cultured, we find ourselves in a troubling situation where our society is professionally analyzed by a group of people whose cognitive processes are fundamentally different from the majority of the population. This dynamic is not necessarily a disadvantage, and is probably unavoidable. However, theorists and planners should be cognizant of this dynamic when drafting social theories that may become the basis of public policy. Such a practice raises the possibility of the value judgments of the cultured elite becoming the theoretical foundation of public policy for the masses.

This is nothing new. The cultured have been making value judgments on the non-cultured since the dawn of civilization. Aristotle was quite sure that “happiness... is more often found with those who are highly cultivated in their minds and in their character... than among those who possess external goods to a useless extent but are deficient in higher qualities.”⁸ In 1854, Thoreau noted that in his New England village of Concord, Massachusetts, the people were “so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them,” and from his rural cottage on the edge of town lamented that “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.”⁹ In 1903, German sociologist Georg Simmel lectured that in the growing industrial cities, the average man was “a mere cog in

8 Russell 1945 (1972), 189

9 Thoreau 1854

an enormous organization of things and powers which tear from his hands all progress, spirituality, and value in order to transform them from their subjective form into the form of a purely objective life.”¹⁰ In 1938, University of Chicago sociologist Louis Wirth wrote of the common recreation of city dwellers of his era:

“Catering to thrills and furnishing means of escape from drudgery, monotony, and routine thus become one of the major functions of urban recreation, which... typically in the urban world results in passive spectatorism on the one hand, or sensational record-smashing feats on the other.”¹¹

It is truly amazing that to this day, the cultured man manages surprise at the uninspired daily life of “the masses.” Life of the uncultured appears to the cultured as perpetual drudgery. But it is a mistake for the cultured to believe that the masses can or should be “saved.” Being uncultured is not a crime, nor a flaw, nor a deficiency. The uncultured are not oppressed, depressed, unintelligent, or unhappy. The only difference is that they have not developed the “activity of thought, and receptiveness to beauty and humane feeling” gained in acculturation.

One area where this misunderstanding is evident today is in the study of the suburbs and the “culture of sprawl.” Ironically, when social scientists refer to suburban culture (or similarly an ethnic culture, national culture, culture of poverty, etc.), they mean the opposite of the word as defined for this essay. They use it more like biologists do – they mean that a people have emerged from an environment – a culture – and have uncritically adopted the accepted norms of their society. Yet very few politically correct social scientists would dare be overcritical of an ethnic culture, religious culture, or a culture of poverty. Suburban culture does not receive such respect. LeGates & Stout offer this summation of academic literature of the modern suburb:

“The suburban developments of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s in America and elsewhere gave birth to a massive literature, most of it highly critical. Damned as culturally dead and socially/racially segregated, the post-World War II suburbs were

10 Simmel 1903 (1950), 422
11 Wirth 1938, 96

called ‘sprawl’ and stigmatized as ‘anti-cities’ (to use Lewis Mumford’s term to describe Los Angeles). Titles such as John Keats’ *The Crack in the Picture Window* (1956), Richard Gordon’s *The Split Level Trap* (1961), Mark Baldassare’s *Trouble in Paradise* (1986), and Robert Fogelson’s *Bourgeois Nightmares* (2005) capture the tone of much of the commentary. Indeed, James Howard Kunstler in *The Geography of Nowhere* (1993) calls the automobile suburbs ‘the evil empire,’ Joel S. Hirschhorn titles his analysis *Sprawl Kills* (2005), and another radical analysis screams *Bomb the Suburbs* (2001)!”¹²

This is a rather alarmist body of work for a study of what is fundamentally just medium-density development. Regardless, after half a century of literary attack on the culture of sprawl, the sprawled and sprawling masses have not much noticed. The prophesied resurgence of inner cities remains more the exception than the rule. New strip-malls and cul-de-sacs continue to chew on farmland on the outskirts of many of the nation’s metropolitan areas. Having lost the argument against suburbia on the grounds of its depressing banality, savvy critics have fallen back to arguments of sustainability. Not only are the suburbs creating vacant, shallow, alienated people, critics argue, they are squandering precious natural resources and destroying the environment.

For many, the natural solution to this problem is to return to our urban “roots” of compact, high-density urban environments, supposedly the period of industrialization and early Fordism from about 1850 until about 1940. But how objective is the advocacy of high-density urbanism? What is the probability that those living in the brief period following the advent of mechanized production but before the broad availability of the automobile had really stumbled upon the ideal built environment for human society? Is this form really the most sustainable? After all, it was the slum conditions of 19th-century cities such as London, Paris, and Manchester that inspired the first urban planners to seek a better urban form.

Ebenzer Howard and Le Corbusier are among the best-known founders of the field of urban planning. Both men
12 LeGates & Stout 1996 (2009), 59

hated the compact crowded cities of their time. Howard proposed systematically depopulating London through construction of “Garden Cities” of 30,000 residents, each city separated by miles of countryside and connected by roads and rails.¹³ Le Corbusier proposed dismantling Paris entirely and reconstructing the city – in place – with giant monolithic skyscrapers separated by vacant green space and connected by superhighways.¹⁴

Likewise, the celebrated American architect Frank Lloyd Wright proposed that United States cities should be encouraged to dissolve into vast regions of single-family homes, each set on no less than a one-acre plot.¹⁵ Urban theorist and sociologist Lewis Mumford anticipated the abandonment of the metropolis with its “ponderous disabilities” in favor of a “polynucleated city.”¹⁶ Eminent American landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead forcefully advocated for the expansion of the cities to incorporate wider streets, more space between houses, and enough green space and tree plantings to “completely shut out the city from our landscapes.”¹⁷ The forefathers of urban planning theory were the original inventors and proponents of de-concentration! One must wonder what they would think of today’s theorists proposing to solve society’s problems by urging the public back into compact cities.

There are certainly social, environmental, and other negative externalities related to sprawl. I maintain, however, that embedded in the critique of sprawl, the (cultured) contemporary urban theorists, consciously or unconsciously, weave subjective value judgments into supposedly objective analyses of built form. This is not a radical statement. Sustainable development scholar John Friedmann has admitted as much, saying, “the social sciences are inevitably imprinted with the values and interests of the author... We cannot escape ideology.”¹⁸

This is not implying that social science should be value-free, or even aspire to it. However, theorists should be aware that the opinions, worldviews, and even cognitive maps of social

13 Fishman 1996 (2003), 31

14 Fishman 1996 (2003), 52

15 Fishman 1996 (2003), 24

16 Mumford 1937, 61

17 Olmstead 1870 in LeGates & Stout 1996 (2009), 313

18 Friedmann 2000, 460

scientists represent the cultured minority, and should be evaluated with respect to the thoughts and habits of the uncultured majority. It was the utopian visions of planners past that advocated disassembly of the metropolis; will anything be improved if the utopian views of planners present are allowed to re-assemble it? The remainder of this essay is an investigation into some of the ways that theorists incorporate value judgments and aesthetic preferences into discussions of sprawl, and a brief evaluation of prevailing views.

PART II: CULTURED CLAIMS EVALUATED

Claim: Sprawl is a result of government subsidy and policy and thus “inorganic.”

It is certainly true that sprawl in the United States was encouraged by substantial government subsidies. The Home Owner’s Loan Corporation (HOLC), the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), tax-deductible mortgage interest, the Interstate Highway Act, subsidy of the oil industry, and more policies all contributed to the national sprawl epidemic. It is worth remembering that such federal subsidies accompanied public policy that acted on the utopian views of social scientists and planners in the early 20th century. In this era of industrialization, the compact city was seen as an enemy of the people; dirty, impersonal, and inhumane. Rent was too high. Homeownership was a luxury of the privileged class. Residents were immobile, tied to employment near the city center. As a solution to the problems of compact industrial cities, home loans were subsidized and highways were built to allow access to inexpensive land on the periphery. It could be argued that the subsidies worked as planned.

A common indictment of sprawl is that because of such federal subsidies, the evolution of cities into sprawling metropolitan areas was artificial and “inorganic.” Evaluating this criticism for cultural bias and value judgments requires evaluating what is meant by “organic” community. Sociologist Louis Wirth considered the “organic nature” of human community to be the “rural-folk society.”¹⁹ Wirth’s view of the original nature of human society as consisting of small kinship groups is consistent with contemporary

19 Wirth 1938, 91

theories of evolutionary psychology²⁰ and theories of the origins of social order.²¹ While this may have been the community structure in an evolutionary environment, nobody is suggesting that this is a preferred, or even possible, social order in contemporary society. Anyways, our current society is so different from the evolutionary environment that theorizing about the organic nature of human communities probably has limited applicability.

A society based on small kinship groups may have been organic in the evolutionary environment. However, in different socioeconomic conditions such as those imposed by modern institutions, organic growth of society may take on a different form. Compact industrial and pre-industrial cities formed in response to the prevalent economic and institutional forces of their day, as do the automobile suburbs of today. Federal subsidies made homeownership and automobile travel more economical but did not mandate that sprawl should occur. Nobody was forced to leave central cities. Furthermore, the origins of suburbanization predated such subsidies; federal policy just made it more affordable. Sprawl was the organic growth of American society in response to the socioeconomic environment of the time, just as compact cities were the organic growth of society in response to the early industrial era. There is nothing less organic about sprawl than any other built form.

Claim: Sprawl is oppressive to the poor.

Claiming that sprawl is oppressive to the poor is an easy accusation to make when evaluating socioeconomic demographics. The American poor are crowded in inner cities or ignored in rural hinterlands, but they are practically absent from the sprawling “technoburbs”.²² Often absent in the framing of this issue is a substantial discussion of how sprawl is more oppressive to the poor than are other social structures. As Peter Marcuse points out, “cities have always been divided. Possibly they always will be – and possibly they should be.”²³

It is a travesty that minorities and the poor been abandoned in

hidden quarters of many inner cities, but class segregation is not a result of sprawl. Class segregation occurs under various urban forms. Many European central cities are population-dense economic hubs, yet high-value real estate in inner cities forces the Euro-poor into “high-rise housing on the urban outskirts.”²⁴ In the rapidly growing cities of the global south, the rich and middle class inhabit fortified enclaves linked by restricted-access corridors comprising a parallel elite city overlaid on the existing landscape.²⁵ Furthermore, even “successful” urban regeneration or gentrification often displaces inner-city poor who are economically or socially pushed out of their home neighborhoods.²⁶

Many of the decentralizing planning theories of the early 20th century were specifically designed to address issues of economic disparity. For example, Ebenezer Howard’s “Garden City” was designed to alleviate “problems of intemperance, of excessive toil, of restless anxiety, of grinding poverty,” and other blights associated with crowded 19th-century London.²⁷ The mistake made by the cultured person is the assumption that the urban poor are neglected because of the physical distance between them and the middle class. Unfortunately, reducing the physical distance without addressing gaps in education, resources, and culture will not sufficiently address the foundations of structural poverty. Advocates of compact cities as a solution to poverty should take care to consider that poverty persists in any socioeconomic system that exploits people. Any attempt to relieve the plight of the poor may be more effectively focused on the poor themselves, or the economic forces that perpetuate structural poverty.

Claim: Sprawl consumes too much land.

A window seat on a cross-country flight provides a depressing view: miles and miles of pointlessly curved roads and cul-de-sacs spiral outward from practically every city in the country, often stretching between horizons with no apparent center at all. When confronted with the fact that endless tracts of wilderness are being paved over, it is an understandable reaction to want the “destruction of

20 Wright 1994
21 Fukuyama 2011
22 Fishman 1996 (2003)
23 Marcuse 2002, 11

24 Davis 2006, 31
25 Davis 2006
26 Logan & Molotch 1987 (2007)
27 Howard 1898, 315

wilderness” to stop. But this is a value judgment.

It is an aesthetic travesty that big-box stores, strip-malls, and neo-colonial single-family homes are covering desolate deserts, rolling hillsides, and lush meadows all over the country. But land is not being destroyed; it is simply being used in a different way. Wilderness is not consumed by sprawl. Wilderness itself is a myth. Modern humans have never known such a thing. Humans have become the dominant species on the planet through their ability to alter the environment; there is not one square inch on the surface of this planet that has not been altered by human activity. These effects on Earth’s global environment will probably outlast our species, and will certainly outlast the infrastructure of our current society. Is a forest preferable to a parking lot? The cultured likely think so. But it is flawed to frame the question as one of land consumption. The value-free question is how we should use the land.

Claim: Sprawl leads to alienation and isolation.

It is ironic to read scholarly critiques of the alienated American suburbanite. Sociologists of the early 20th century could not write enough on the theme of the “loneliness of the crowd” in the compact city. Georg Simmel found the middle-class residents of dense metropolises to be misanthropic, narcissistic, and blasé. He postulated that a city forces adaptive modifications to the very psychology of its inhabitants – generally related to “intensification of nervous stimulation.”²⁸ This psychology manifests in the urban personality, he argued, as a “latent antipathy” and “practical antagonism” that are actually necessary for the metropolitan middle-class to psychically function in the context of a large, dense population.²⁹ According to Simmel, “if so many inner reactions were responses to the continuous external contacts with innumerable people as are those in a small town... one would be completely [fractured] internally and come to an unimaginable psychic state.”³⁰

Louis Wirth’s construct of community in the metropolis was similarly bleak, defined by alienated labor and alienated neighbors:

28 Simmel 1903 (1950), 410
29 Simmel 1903 (1950), 416
30 Simmel 1903 (1950), 415

“The proximity of industrial and commercial establishments makes an area both economically and socially undesirable for residential purposes... The close living together and working together of individuals who have no sentimental and emotional ties foster a spirit of competition, aggrandizement, and mutual exploitation.”³¹

Wirth did, however, perceive city life to be a modest improvement over the limited opportunity for acculturation allowed by the ignorance of rural life. In the city, according to Wirth, “the individual gains... a certain degree of emancipation or freedom from the personal and emotional controls of intimate groups.”³² Simmel observed this same feature of metropolitan life: “Today metropolitan man is ‘free’ in a spiritualized and refined sense, in contrast to the pettiness and prejudices which hem in the small-town man.”³³

With esteemed sociologists advancing such dismal descriptions of city community while simultaneously rejecting rural life as primitive, it is no wonder the preeminent planners of the day believed that development should proceed as described by Lewis Mumford:

“The differentiation of foot traffic from wheeled traffic in independent systems; the insulation of residence quarters from through roads; the discontinuous street pattern; the polarization of social life in specially spotted civic nuclei... Instead of trusting to the mere massing of population to produce the necessary social concentration, and social drama, we must now seek these results through deliberate local nucleation and finer regional articulation.”³⁴

In other words, says Mumford, for the good of society, we must sprawl! Suburbia proceeded in a way that physically resembled Mumford’s vision, but his utopian community did not result. By 1940, he already lamented that the suburbs represented “a collective attempt to lead a private life.”³⁵

31 Wirth 1938, 15
32 Wirth 1938, 12
33 Simmel 1903 (1950), 422
34 Mumford 1937, 62
35 Quoted in Knox 2008, 150

Claim: Sprawl consumes too much energy.

Sprawling communities – with large detached houses and automobile-centric travel – are usually found to be more demanding of energy resources than more compact communities. Thus, sprawling communities are often said to consume too much energy. But this is a value judgment.

What is defined as “too much” energy consumption is partially an issue of engineering, but is primarily an aesthetic concern. Focusing on the issue of oil consumption, what even George W. Bush called America’s “addiction to oil,”³⁶ really is unsustainable on multiple levels. In the near term, it puts us at a disadvantage in international relations with nations that sit on top of massive oil fields. In the medium term, as our economy is dependent on fossil fuel, American prosperity is tied to the cost of a barrel of sweet crude. In the long term, we will never run out of petroleum, but at some point it will become prohibitively expensive to drive the economy. The U.S. Energy Information Agency (EIA) is not willing to predict when world peak oil (i.e., when demand outpaces possible production rates) will occur any more precisely than estimating it will be “closer to the middle of the 21st century than to its beginning.”³⁷ Current EIA forecasts extend 25 years forward, and predict crude oil to be selling at \$145 per barrel in 2010 dollars in the year 2035. Such a price would be a manageable increase over today’s prices, which ranged between \$85 and \$110 per barrel in 2011.³⁸ If the EIA is correct, we can look forward to a 2035 model year lineup of V8 gasoline-powered sports cars and pickup trucks.

In any event, replacing fossil fuels is just a matter of engineering and investment. We could meet projected energy demands through even minor increases in efficiency and alternative energy sources. Technology is making renewable energy sources increasingly competitive. If nothing else, our supply of nuclear fuel would last thousands of years, even with existing technology.³⁹ Sprawl per se is not a threat to our energy supply.

36 Bush 2006

37 Wood, Long, & Morehouse 2004

38 U.S. Energy Information Agency 2012

39 Lomborg 2001, 129

PART III: THE UNDERLYING ETHOS OF CULTURED CRITICISM

To an educated yet uncultured individual living in one of America’s countless suburbs, it may be difficult to understand why many urban planners and social scientists are waging an ideological war against the suburban way of life. Are the suburbs really harming anybody? Why is sprawl such a lightning rod for cultural criticism? It does not seem reasonable that the density of development could attract such controversy. What is more likely is that sprawl represents values within contemporary society that the cultured do not generally share.

It is often said that the history books are written by the winners of wars – implying that history may be biased to the author. Similarly, social critiques are written by winners of advanced degrees in social science, and are similarly biased. Social scientists have admitted that the field is inherently subjective,⁴⁰ but do not often recognize that the subject is fundamentally different from themselves. Cultured social scientists believe they are studying abstractions of themselves, when in reality they are studying the uncultured masses. Sprawl is a product of conspicuous competitive consumption – a drive that the cultured do not understand. Cultured men have been repeating a serial critique of their societies for centuries: As Aristotle said, “Happiness... is more often found with those who are highly cultivated in their minds and in their character... than among those who possess external goods to a useless extent but are deficient in higher qualities.”

Aristotle could not understand the apparent need of his contemporaries to conspicuously consume far beyond their material needs while allowing their potentially miraculous human minds to rot on the vine. Cultured men today continue to puzzle over this, and yet the answer is simple: most of society is not cultured. The uncultured majority is the inspiration for the expression, “ignorance is bliss.” They are the reason that Rome’s public executions necessitated a Coliseum. They are the reason that gold was worth dying for long before it found a use in electronic circuits. They are the reason that Las Vegas profits from a

40 Friedmann 2000

combination of simulacra-spectacle, all-you-can-eat buffets, and anonymous sex. They are the people that built endless highway loops between fortified strip-malls, country clubs, and gated communities. They are the masses. They always have been. They are human.

All humans have inherited from eons of evolution an instinct to consume and an intellect to invent remarkable new methods of consumption.⁴¹ Only a minority have developed the cognitive patterns necessary to explore what it truly means to be this human animal; this is the cultured minority, and this is the pool from which social scientists invariably spring. Social scientists must account for this when they are theorizing the mass majority – they are different. The average person is not a cultured social scientist. Cultured social scientists have trouble understanding how an uncultured suburbanite could possibly be happy living in a place so ugly. The cultured fail to recognize that the uncultured do not possess the same a priori conceptions of aesthetics. To them, a sprawling suburb is not ugly – it's home. We should not be surprised when suburbanites defend their home – their way of life – with the same passion that the cultured have for the communities where they choose to reside.

PART IV: CONCLUSION

We live in a society that has sprawled and – negating a drastic shift – will continue sprawling. This built form is an organic result of the current social and economic environment. Taking for granted the technologies of modernity such as transportation and communication technology, this paradigm was probably unavoidable. Conspicuous, competitive consumption is a natural response of the majority of uncultured human beings within such an economic environment. Sprawl is a byproduct of such an economy. This dynamic is difficult for most social scientists to understand, as social scientists tend to fit the definition of cultured individuals.

There are objectively valid criticisms of sprawl as unsustainable, but they are often difficult to dissociate from hidden value judgments. This is not to suggest that social scientists should withhold moral values or simply evaluate

society without suggesting improvements. If we assume, in theory, that the myriad of problems that accompany urban sprawl are either (a) not endemic to sprawl but a feature of modern society in general, or (b) can be solved in ways that do not include land use restrictions, then there is nothing to gain by advocating the end of sprawl except aesthetic improvements.

It may even be that Montagu was right, and the whole of society has the potential for acculturation. Even if this is true, such a process cannot begin with wholesale densification. It is doubtful that societal-scale problems such as racial prejudice or religious intolerance would be affected by re-shuffling of population, and these types of clear moral issues are where the cultured should concentrate their energy. If they really wish to nudge society towards utopia there is much work to be done even to convince the mass of men that they are all equally human.

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Michigan Central Station, Detroit, MI (Photo Credit: Oleksandra Topolnytska)