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The Multiethnic Neighborhood in the United States

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Review Essay

J. Eric Oliver (2010). *The Paradoxes of Integration: Race, Neighborhood, and Civic Life in Multiethnic America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. viii + 199 pp., tables, notes, index, \$18.00 (paper).

Antero Pietila (2010). *Not in My Neighborhood: How Bigotry Shaped a Great American City*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee. xiii + 320 pp., illustrations, notes, index, \$28.95 (cloth).

Martín Sánchez-Jankowski (2008). *Cracks in the Pavement: Social Change and Resilience in Poor Neighborhoods*. Berkeley: University of California Press. xiv + 487 pp., tables, figures, appendix, notes, bibliography, index, \$60 (cloth), \$24.95 (paper).

Mark Wild (2005). *Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press. xi + 298 pp., illustrations, tables, notes, bibliography, index, \$39.95 (cloth).

Despite its elusive definition, the “neighborhood” is one of the most popular conceptual variables in the United States. This is partly because the fields of urban history and urban studies are robust and partly because of the emotional attachment that many Americans have about their neighborhoods. From a practical point of view, neighborhoods are social and geographic entities easily demarcated in both the archives and the street, even if they seldom correspond to census tracts, zip codes, school districts, or any meaningful political subdivisions. Historians and social scientists study neighborhoods because they care about them, but also because they view them as vehicles to make general statements about cities or even the nation. Some recent books that explicitly explore neighborhoods include Huping Ling’s study of the Chinatowns of Chicago; Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof’s examination of the migration of Dominicans from Cristo Rey in Santo Domingo to Washington Heights in New York City and back; Andrew Deener’s ethnographic study of the socioeconomic differences of the neighborhoods that constitute Venice in Los Angeles; and Philippe Bourgois’s exploration of the underground drug economy of East Harlem. To be sure, these writers deal with neighborhoods located in the largest cities of the United States, but most studies of cities, big and small, consider the investigation of neighborhood dynamics as something unavoidable.¹

The multiethnic neighborhood is also a popular subject, since the United States is truly a multicultural nation. Topics of cultural diversity increasingly dominate university curricula. Studies of multiethnic neighborhoods reveal contemporary characteristics of American identity, even though some historians focus on the period between the 1880s and the 1930s, demonstrating that many neighborhoods in the United States were multinational before becoming hypersegregated. The study of rising residential segregation in the twentieth century is also influenced from the contemporary multiethnic nature of the country, showing that historians may be studying the past but their topics and approaches are frequently influenced from the present.

In *Street Meeting*, Mark Wild argues that during the first four decades of the twentieth century, diverse groups of people living in neighborhoods around the downtown area of Los Angeles constantly mixed and interacted in cultural, economic, social, and political realms. In Lincoln Heights, Boyle Heights, Belvedere, Sonoratown, Chinatown, South Central, and the Market District, working-class Mexicans, Italians, Jews, Japanese, Russians, Chinese, African Americans, Anglos, Germans, Indians, and others interacted. Wild rejects the claim that Los Angeles was the “white spot” of America—a position that Los Angeles boosters invented in order to differentiate the city from others in the northeast that purportedly suffered from ethnic heterogeneity, which was identified as a source of social conflict and poverty.² Wild allies himself with scholars such as George Sánchez and Josh Sides, who argue that many prewar neighborhoods in Los Angeles were defined by ethnic and racial diversity rather than segregation.³ Playgrounds, worksites, religious institutions, bedrooms, streets, public parks, and community halls were the neighborhood sites where cross-cultural encounters occurred and these included romantic arrangements, interfaith efforts, children’s play, product exchanging, political organizing, and commercial sex.

Although ethn racial diversity permeated all spheres of existence during this period, Wild carefully problematizes this contact by discussing its limits. On the one hand, it was easier for children to make friends with kids of different backgrounds, despite efforts by school officials or parents to separate and track them. On the other hand, established racial and ethnic communities did not accept inter-ethn racial romantic and sexual contact and ostracized individuals who dated or married people outside their ethnic community. Prostitution that involved individuals of various ethnic and racial backgrounds found its place under an unacceptable continuum of transgression that included all kinds of mixed relationships. During this period, it was easier for residents of central neighborhoods in Los Angeles to live next to each other and to challenge racial discrimination through cross-cultural alliances that involved political and religious organizing, rather than through familial networks that celebrated inter-ethn racial romantic and sexual contact.

Despite internal cultural attitudes that restricted the completeness of inter-ethn racial contact, Wild argues that external political-economic forces gradually undermined these communities and dispersed them. Wild is influenced by Martin J. Sklar’s work on the corporate remaking of American capitalism and Robert H. Wiebe’s account on the construction of a new social order in the United States during the Progressive era.⁴ Wild uses the term “corporate liberalism” to describe the ideological underpinnings of the project undertaken by the elites of Los Angeles during this period: “This ‘corporate reconstruction’ of ethn racial communities

entailed a two-part process—recognizing the existence of non-Anglo populations and their potential as political actors and isolating them from Anglos (and each other) as discrete entities with specific symbiotic roles to fill in the social and economic life of the city, thereby diluting their collective strength” (p. 4). In their efforts to order the diverse populations of Los Angeles according to the needs of corporate liberalism, the elites of the city and the state were involved in a number of interventions such as exclusionary zoning, restrictive covenants, Americanization projects, redevelopment, and racial discrimination. These interventions set the stage for postwar developments that transformed these communities into the segregated neighborhoods that defined Los Angeles for most of the twentieth century. Wild’s narrative, however, lacks a causal explanation as to how this process of marginalization, displacement, and segregation triumphed after World War II, especially since this was not the pattern during the prewar period. World War II definitely represents a catalyst in the history of Los Angeles, unleashing a number of socioeconomic forces not encountered before. However, this story of how the diverse neighborhoods of Los Angeles were replaced by segregated ones is part of a different book.

The answer to how the United States became a hypersegregated nation in the postwar period is partially provided in *Not in My Neighborhood*. Antero Pietila examines patterns of residential segregation in Baltimore and not Los Angeles and he shows that a discriminatory housing market existed there decades before World War II. In the 1880s, Baltimore’s black population became the second largest of any city in the nation because of a migration from rural parts of Maryland. By the first three decades of the twentieth century, one could notice two contradictory developments. On the one hand, the growing African American population occupied various decent neighborhoods and the departure of Johns Hopkins University from its original location provided many home-buying opportunities for middle- and upper-income blacks. On the other hand, the segregation of public and quasi-public places intensified with restaurants, hospitals, cemeteries, and theaters separating blacks from whites. Some outlets such as hotels, the symphony, and the Peabody Conservatory of Music excluded African Americans completely, while department stores refused to extend to blacks the privileges enjoyed by white customers. During this period, three separate real estate markets emerged; one for whites, one for Jews, and one for blacks. Numerous neighborhoods evolved from non-Jewish to Jewish and eventually to African American. In 1910, the city council passed a segregation bill, designating each block in Baltimore according to race and prohibiting blacks from moving to blocks in which more than half of the population was white and vice versa. This ordinance lasted until 1917 when the U.S. Supreme Court found local residential segregation laws to be unconstitutional. From that time onward, communities used restrictive covenants in order to bar certain groups of people from buying or renting property because of their race, ethnicity, nationality, or religion. In Baltimore, white neighborhood residents usually barred African Americans and Jews, and Jewish neighborhoods barred African Americans, though all kinds of combinations were possible. This state of affairs continued until 1948, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that restrictive covenants were not enforceable by the courts, even though the movement of African Americans to Jewish and white neighborhoods was already underway because of blockbusting.

Pietila's postwar account of blockbusting, predatory lending, and government apathy toward African Americans is exceptional. African Americans paid more for inferior housing because they had no choice. Speculators rapidly acquired and unloaded such housing, because they knew that its condition violated city legislation. Public officials stopped enforcing building codes in black neighborhoods because they feared the further movement of African Americans to adjacent white neighborhoods. Many whites relocated to the more suburban Baltimore County, because of black expansion and the deterioration of housing inside the city. For these whites, stable homeownership in areas where the value of houses appreciated signified the accomplishment of a lifetime, given that the United States lacked a comprehensive welfare state and could not fulfill most of their material needs. Pietila emphasizes this and makes it clear that residential segregation is the main reason for the postwar decline of Baltimore.

Not in my Neighborhood represents an important addition to a growing subfield in urban history that explores the political economy of housing in twentieth-century United States. Pietila joins authors Beryl Satter, Rhonda Y. Williams, David M. P. Freund, and Wendell E. Prichett who have recently written on policies and practices that created and maintained a hypersegregated nation. At the same time, this is a commercial book that implies a couple of things. On the one hand, "good" and "bad" characters appear in different sections, making the book entertaining to readers. On the other hand, most developments occur because of the conflict between these larger-than-life characters. Their unfortunate decisions drive the narrative and appear as more important than historical structures and processes.⁵

In *The Paradoxes of Integration*, J. Eric Oliver moves to the contemporary era and explores attitudes concerning race and community in an increasingly multiethnic United States. Using data from the U.S. Census (2000), the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality (1992–1994), the Social Capital Community Benchmark Study (2000), the Citizen, Information and Democracy Study (2004), and the National Politics Study (2004), Oliver focuses on four broadly defined racial groups: Asian Americans, blacks, Latinos, and whites. While it is Oliver's hope that his book can illuminate on the future of race relations in the United States, he also admits that his conclusions are dominated by a number of paradoxes that are difficult to reconcile.

Oliver's conclusions depend on the level of geography and the degree of racial homogeneity. He concludes that at the metropolitan level, living among people of other races corresponds with higher levels of racial resentment. However, this does not necessarily reflect what happens at the neighborhood level. Indeed, people who live in multiracial neighborhoods are more tolerant toward people of other racial backgrounds. In his effort to explain this contradiction, Oliver tries to merge two opposing hypotheses from the social sciences. The first one known as the threat hypothesis argues that racial antipathy emerges when members of a dominant racial group believe that their entitlement to status, privileges, and resources is threatened by members of subordinate racial groups. The second one known as the contact hypothesis contends that negative racial attitudes are psychological and learned early in life; however, these attitudes become more positive later in life if interracial social contact occurs under favorable conditions. Oliver claims that both of these hypotheses are accurate depending on whether the study focuses on the macro or the micro level.⁶

The problem with this argument is that what happens at the neighborhood level can actually explain what happens at the metropolitan level, if racial segregation is factored in the equation. As Oliver writes, "racial hostility and feelings of competition were greatest in predominantly same-race neighborhoods within racially mixed metropolitan areas" (p. 95). Given that most areas in the United States are still hypersegregated, racial antipathy is more likely to exist than racial tolerance. Still, the optimistic portion of Oliver's study where people who live in interracial neighborhoods get along with groups of other races has its merits. It is similar to Elijah Anderson's concept of the cosmopolitan canopy: public and quasi-public spaces where racial competition and antipathy are suspended by the people who frequent them. These spaces represent islands of civility in a sea of racial segregation. This means that as the population of the United States becomes more diverse, the possibility of racial harmony also exists in more residential spaces. If this is the case, the threat hypothesis is closer to what actually prevails in most of the United States, but the contact hypothesis can possibly give us glimpses of the future.⁷

Another paradox that Oliver discovers is the connection between multiculturalism and community engagement. Although Oliver finds that racial tolerance is at its highest when all four racial groups share the same living and working environments, he also finds that civic participation, levels of social trust, and the sense of community decline in these same environments. To be sure, each racial group behaves differently and has its own historical, linguistic, and cultural reasons for its disengagement in community affairs, but Oliver suggests that homogeneous neighborhoods make for more engaged citizens. While this may be true, since at least the 1990s, social scientists have argued that Americans spend more time by themselves and devote less time in civic affairs. Robert Putnam claims that this rising social isolation explains the declining levels of trust, participation, community, and political engagement. Instead of having their own logic of community affairs, multiracial communities seem to follow this larger U.S. disengagement pattern.⁸

Oliver admits his study would immensely benefit from ethnographic research. Martín Sánchez-Jankowski's book *Cracks in the Pavement* represents a prime example of how wide-ranging ethnographic research can enrich our understanding of urban neighborhoods in the United States and force a reconsideration about many of the assumptions regarding poverty. Sánchez-Jankowski carried out participant observation research between 1991 and 1999 in five low-income neighborhoods located in Los Angeles and New York City; the author never discloses the names of these neighborhoods in order to protect their residents and institutions, but reveals their approximate locations as well as their racial and ethnic makeup. Sánchez-Jankowski argues that his study is similar to Eugene Genovese's book on the life of slaves: "His classic study of slave society in the southern United States described the life the slaves made for themselves in a condition of extreme bondage, and my own investigation analyzes the life the urban poor have made for themselves under conditions of severe deprivation" (p. 10).⁹ Sánchez-Jankowski credits the influence of William Foote Whyte, Herbert J. Gans, and Gerald D. Suttles, not only methodologically but also conceptually. In their pioneering monographs, these three urban sociologists studied low-income neighborhoods in the United States and rejected the Chicago School's thesis of social disorganization.¹⁰ In this book, Sánchez-Jankowski argues that disorganization theory fails to explain the longevity of poor

neighborhoods. If anything, these neighborhoods are quite structured, even if that structure differs from the ones prevalent in affluent neighborhoods. Moreover, Sánchez-Jankowski rejects the claim that social change occurs in poor neighborhoods only because of external macrosocietal forces and shows that there are also internal agents influencing it. Finally, Sánchez-Jankowski uses Claude Fischer's subcultural theory of urbanism to contend that poor neighborhoods develop subcultures that reflect their specific circumstances and these subcultures are maintained but not caused by urbanism. This argument has many similarities with the controversial conclusions advanced by Oscar Lewis about poor neighborhoods. While Sánchez-Jankowski agrees with Lewis's finding that long-term poverty can create a culture, he does not think that this culture has a disorganizing effect. Instead he argues that this culture remains dynamic only if there is a structural and physical environment that supports it.¹¹

Sánchez-Jankowski identifies five institutions that reinforce existing social hierarchies in the neighborhood (or develop new ones): public housing projects, "mom-and-pop" stores, barbershops and hair salons, gangs, and public schools. Although all of these institutions have the possibility of being neighborhood institutions and benefit the community, they may also acquire a different character and become economic enterprises or government institutions; in these cases, their benefit to the community becomes questionable. For example, the local public school may have to operate like a government institution rather than a neighborhood institution when it has to enforce new controversial policies decided by the school board. Similarly, street gangs may become economic enterprises in which case they seek to benefit themselves at the detriment of the neighborhood. Although changes in institutions or their demise may cause disequilibrium in the neighborhood, other institutions seek to reestablish the existing order by trying to compensate for the absence of the lost neighborhood institutions. Over time, new neighborhood institutions emerge and adequately replace the loss of older ones, though the author insists that for most neighborhood people, quality is preferable to quantity. Sánchez-Jankowski devotes two chapters for each institution; the first shows how the particular institution contributes to the social order of the community or how it sometimes fails to do so and the second explores the role of the institution as an agent of social change or agent of preservation. The level of analysis in this book is clearly multifaceted, with Sánchez-Jankowski trying to unveil the complexities of life in each neighborhood by using multiple concepts and causal explanations and building upon each other. Although this approach reflects on the various forces that operate in the neighborhood simultaneously, the complexity of the analysis makes it difficult to evaluate the strength of the social theories advanced outside the specific contexts that the author is operating.

These four books written by a historian, a journalist, a political scientist, and a sociologist demonstrate the extent to which the "neighborhood" has maintained its importance as a conceptual variable in the social sciences and history. These scholars may not be approaching the "neighborhood" in the same manner and they may not even have the same conception of it. However, it is easy for readers to bridge these variations in a productive way and these four books will make scholars rethink their own ideas about neighborhoods. Wild's book will inspire more historians to further examine the multiethnic urbanity of the United States in the period between 1880 and 1930 and to do this in cities outside the northeast. Pietila's work will convince historians that the topic of residential segregation in the

twentieth century is still dynamic. Oliver's book will influence social scientists to examine contemporary multiethnic neighborhoods from up-close in order to test his conclusions and improve them. And Sánchez-Jankowski's theories will encourage scholars to further question social disorganization theories and study low income neighborhoods in their own terms.

Notes

¹ Huping Ling, *Chinese Chicago: Race, Transnational Migration and Community since 1870* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, *A Tale of Two Cities: Santo Domingo and New York after 1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Andrew Deener, *Venice: A Contested Bohemia in Los Angeles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

² For versions of this argument see William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of Its Mexican Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), and Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

³ George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

⁴ Martin J. Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916: The Market, the Law, and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order 1877-1920* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1967). To be sure, Wild does not follow through with the concept of corporate liberalism throughout the book. As for his usage of order, it is used in a general sense and not theorized. For writing on order and disorder from a conceptual perspective, see: Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life* (New York: Knopf, 1970); Lyn H. Lofland, *A World of Strangers: Order and Action in Urban Public Space* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Wesley G. Skogan, *Disorder and Decline: Crime and the Spiral of Decay in American Neighborhoods* (New York: Free Press, 1990); Frank Hearn, *Moral Order and Social Disorder: The American Search for Civil Society* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1997); Themis Chronopoulos, *Spatial Regulation in New York City: From Urban Renewal to Zero Tolerance* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

⁵ Beryl Satter, *Family Properties: Race, Real Estate, and the Exploitation of Black Urban America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009); Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles against Urban Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); David M. P. Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Wendell E. Prichett, *Robert Clifton Weaver and the American City: The Life and Times of an Urban Reformer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). For an overview on postwar segregation see Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁶ The threat hypothesis originated in Herbert Blumer, "Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position," *Pacific Sociological Review* 1 (Spring 1958): 3-7, and was expanded by a number of social

scientists including Lawrence Bobo, "Prejudice as Group Position: Microfoundations of a Sociological Approach to Racism and Race Relations," *Journal of Social Issues* 55 (Fall 1999): 445–72. The contact hypothesis has its roots in Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1954). Most of the writings utilizing both of these theories focus on the relations of blacks and whites in the United States, though there have been more recent efforts to make their scope more multiracial and even transnational. See Lawrence Bobo and Vincent L. Hutchins, "Perceptions of Racial Group Competition: Extending Blumer's Theory of Group Position to a Multiracial Social Context," *American Sociological Review* 61 (December 1966): 951–72, and Thomas F. Pettigrew, "Intergroup Contact Theory," *Annual Review of Psychology* 49 (February 1998): 65–85.

⁷ For patterns of residential segregation, see Douglas S. Massey, "Residential Segregation and Neighborhood Conditions in U.S. Metropolitan Areas," in *America Becoming: Racial Trends and their Consequences*, ed. Neil Smelser, William Julius Wilson, and Faith Mitchel (Washington: National Academy Press, 2001), 391–434. The concept of the cosmopolitan canopy is articulated in Elijah Anderson, *The Cosmopolitan Canopy: Race and Civility in Everyday Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011).

⁸ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000). In an article that he published in 2007, Putnam made similar conclusions about diversity and community engagement. However, he argued that neither the conflict hypothesis nor the contact hypothesis could explain this, because people living in racially heterogeneous areas distrusted all kinds of people, including individuals from their own racial and ethnic group. See Robert D. Putnam, "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-First Century. The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30 (June 2007): 137–74.

⁹ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Random House, 1974).

¹⁰ William Foote Whyte, *Street Corner Society: Social Structure of an Italian Slum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943); Herbert J. Gans, *The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian-Americans* (New York: The Free Press, 1962); Gerald D. Suttles, *The Social Order of the Slum: Ethnicity and Territory in the Inner City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

¹¹ Claude S. Fischer, "Toward a Sub-cultural Theory of Urbanism," *American Journal of Sociology* 80 (May 1975): 543–77. Oscar Lewis's "culture of poverty" was appropriated by conservatives who argued that poor people and their "defective" culture were to blame for their persistent and intergenerational poverty. After the early 1960s, Lewis's findings were discredited in the social sciences and his work fell into disrepute. Two of the books where Lewis advanced his arguments are Oscar Lewis, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1959), and Oscar Lewis, *A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York* (New York: Random House, 1965).

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